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ILR Impact Brief - Community College Websites and Barriers to Access

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Abstract

[Excerpt] Community colleges, on average, serve 335 students with disabilities, although that number climbs to 5,000 at the largest college surveyed for this project. Nearly all community colleges that participated in the survey rely on the web for a variety of student services, but only half have instituted requirements regarding web accessibility for individuals with disabilities. Actual evaluations of accessibility and ease of use revealed that none of the websites analyzed complied with all federal standards on accessibility, and many web pages encompassed usability obstacles (e.g., unfamiliar terminology, unintuitive navigation schemes, and hard-to-read design elements) that affected disabled and non-disabled individuals alike.

Keywords

community college, accessibility, disabilities, internet, navigation

Comments

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For a more in-depth analysis, please see: Erickson, W., Trerise, S., Lee, C., Van Looy, S., & Bruyere, S. (2007). *Web based student processes at community colleges: Removing barriers to access [Electronic version]*. Ithaca NY: Cornell University Employment and Disability Institute.

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IMPACT BRIEF

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Community College Websites and Barriers to Access

Research question: Are community college websites accessible to individuals with disabilities?

Conclusion: Community colleges, on average, serve 335 students with disabilities, although that number climbs to 5,000 at the largest college surveyed for this project. Nearly all community colleges that participated in the survey rely on the web for a variety of student services, but only half have instituted requirements regarding web accessibility for individuals with disabilities. Actual evaluations of accessibility and ease of use revealed that none of the websites analyzed complied with all federal standards on accessibility, and many web pages encompassed usability obstacles (e.g., unfamiliar terminology, unintuitive navigation schemes, and hard-to-read design elements) that affected disabled and non-disabled individuals alike.

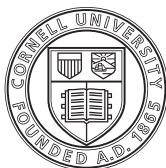
Policy implication: Increasing reliance on the web by colleges and universities to attract, inform, and interact with students makes accessibility and usability critical concerns. These are particularly pressing issues for public community colleges, which educate sizeable numbers of students with disabilities. Educational and other organizations that seek contact with customers and clients should thoroughly test website design and functionality for compliance with federal standards on accessibility and ease of use by all target demographic

groups. A step-by-step process and resource guide prepared by the researchers to help college administrators and staffs develop accessible websites can be found at www.webaccesstoolkit.org.

Abstract: Internet use is a commonplace of modern life. In educational settings, web-based technology can open or close doors to students with disabilities: admissions applications, financial aid information, schedules, class assignments, bursar bills, and the like are typically posted on the web. As committed providers of post-secondary education to students with disabilities and thus a link to better employment opportunities, community colleges need websites that are accessible to students with disabilities and, not incidentally, user-friendly for all. Sites that fail to meet accessibility guidelines increase the potential for inadvertent discrimination against students with disabilities.

Community colleges enroll more than 70% of all students with disabilities who attend public post-secondary institutions. A recent survey for this project found that the vast majority of these schools (99%) offer at least one online student service, while a small minority provide certain services, such as course registration or financial aid applications, exclusively through the web. Although nearly three-quarters of the respondents said their colleges had guidelines for web design, only half had requirements concerning web accessibility for students with disabilities. About half the respondents cited lack of awareness about the need for accessibility, lack of knowledge about how to develop accessible sites, and concern about costs and time as barriers to creating accessible sites.

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The researchers also evaluated the accessibility and usability of online student services. The standards established in Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 regarding accessibility of federal websites were used as the accessibility criteria. Because the web is a primary tool to recruit prospective students, project evaluators first tested for compliance with web accessibility standards by zeroing in on pages potential attendees are most likely to encounter. Of the 30 community college websites tested, none of the home pages, financial aid pages, academic programs pages, or disability services pages met the Section 508 standards; results for admissions application pages were slightly better.

Next, the researchers focused on usability. They identified tasks and processes that all prospective students (with disabilities and without) are likely to perform on the web and chose two community college websites as test cases. The researchers' particular interest was determining how people with visual disabilities and reading-related learning disabilities fared compared to people without disabilities (the control group). Here they found that almost all users (i.e., all the testers) had some difficulty completing certain tasks; online admissions forms were most problematic. In general, people encountered similar usability obstacles regardless of disability type or in the absence of any disability. Usability issues included unfamiliar terminology, unintuitive navigation schemes, unclear content headings, large quantities of unorganized data, and hard-to-read design elements.

Despite the weaknesses in web design that surfaced through the research, analysis of the survey data suggested strong interest in the topic among community college decision makers. Of the group currently lack-

ing accessibility requirements, half indicated they planned to develop some within the year. Moreover, the survey elicited an unusually high response rate of 79%.

In an effort to facilitate the process of ensuring and improving both accessibility and usability, the research team designed an online toolkit for community colleges (www.webaccesstoolkit.org). The site explains the terminology, the legal requirements, and the context, and provides a step-by-step guide to designing and developing a website that is accessible to persons with disabilities and user friendly for all.

Methodology: This project involved a survey of 885 public and private two-year colleges and hands-on testing of a subset of websites by individuals with disabilities and by a control group.

Source publication: "Web-Based Student Processes at Community Colleges: Removing Barriers to Access" appears at <http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/edicollect/1241/>. The research was jointly conducted by the Employment and Disability Institute (ILR) and the Institute for Community College Development (ILR) with a grant from the U.S. Department of Education National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (Grant No. H133G040255).

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