POLICYMATTERS
[Campus Environment & Political Context]

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College Is Hard Enough:
Digital Technology Should Work for Everyone ©

by Sharon Krevor-Weisbaum

It was the summer just before she started college. Sarah,[1] a blind student, had performed well in high school, and she was a scholarship winner at the summer conference hosted by the National Federation of the Blind. Like most of her peers, she was excited to begin her freshman year in college. She wanted to be a scientist.

In the previous spring, she had been accepted at a prestigious university on the East Coast. Her parents assured her that the university was a terrific place to learn and that the Office of Disability Services would provide her with the accommodations she needed to compete with her peers on an equal basis. Sarah grew concerned, however, when she discovered that important information on the university's website homepage was not available to her through her screen reader—the software on her computer that allows her to independently access digital content by rendering it in speech or Braille. After she called the university and discussed her questions directly, she let go of her concerns and accepted the offer of admission.

Sarah moved into a dorm, met her friendly roommates, and began her college journey. As part of her orientation week, she quickly found that she could not review the online course catalogue or register for courses because the online registration system was inaccessible. Once again, the system had not been designed to allow her screen reader to read aloud the information on the website. She called her advisor, who had no idea what to do other than to call the Office of Disability Services. Although that

office was sympathetic, the staff member was not surprised to hear her complaint because students had complained about the same problem in the past. Sarah was forced to sit with her advisor, listen to him read the course descriptions, tell him what she wanted to take, and then have him complete her online registration. It is not hard to understand the frustration and even humiliation Sarah felt from not being able to independently complete such a routine task.

The following week was worse. She went to the first day of her pre-calculus class and was confronted with using a "clicker," a device that every student was required to purchase for class. The clicker was a touchscreen device that the professor used not only to record attendance but also to provide students with extra-credit points when they answered questions correctly in class. Because Sarah couldn't see the screen and there were no tactile controls or mechanisms for audio output, the clicker was totally inaccessible for her.[2] Furthermore, all of the practice problems, homework assignments, weekly tests, and mid-term and final exams had to be accessed through a website that, she quickly discovered, was also completely inaccessible.

Returning to her dorm room, Sarah knew that she had to use the advocacy skills she had learned from her mentors at the National Federation of the Blind. She wrote a calm but emphatic e-mail to her pre-calculus professor, copying her academic advisor and also her contact at the Office of Disability Services. But she was shocked to find that the learning management system used by the professor to communicate with his students was inaccessible, meaning that she could not even send him the e-mail.[3] She went to the Math Department website, but could not find a phone number for the professor because that site was also inaccessible. Her roommate had to find the number for her.

When she spoke with her professor, he was very nice and even apologetic. He suggested that the two of them have weekly tutorials and noted that perhaps he could identify another student who would be willing to read her homework to her. Although Sarah was appreciative, she realized that doing difficult math problems with a reader would not be the same as being able to work through the problems on her own.

The next day Sarah found herself in an exciting literature course. She knew that she could use her iPad to download, in an accessible format, the wonderful classic literature that was on the syllabus. She was very hopeful, until she learned that her professor expected students to work collaboratively in small groups to write their literature critiques using an inaccessible program.

Sarah wondered whether she would have to leave college before she had even started. Would she have to give up her dream of studying at this university, where she had already begun to make friends and where she knew she could graduate with a degree that would open doors to a career as a scientist? How could she tackle these enormous barriers on her own? She called her parents, who called the National Federation of the Blind for help.

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I tell this story so that technology experts and educational policy-makers can appreciate the power that they have to change the experience of so many blind students—and faculty—on college and university campuses.

We all know that technology has changed how students interact with professors, how students access information, and how institutions communicate with students. These are exciting changes, but unfortunately, students and faculty who are blind or who have other print disabilities are at a disadvantage, not because of their disability but because educational institutions (and yes, the developers of the products that institutions purchase) are making decisions that exclude these members of the campus community.

The National Federation of the Blind and the attorneys who represent its members are making every possible attempt to educate, to advocate, and where necessary, to litigate in order to break down these unnecessary technological barriers. No simple solution exists that will enable an institution to remove these accessibility barriers overnight. But it is time to shift the culture, fix the problems, and stop continuing to make decisions such as purchasing inaccessible learning management

systems or implementing inaccessible software programs when accessible, mainstream alternatives exist. The culture change must start from the campus leadership. Staff and faculty who understand educational technology and its marketplace must educate and sensitize campus leadership about accessibility, the institution's legal obligations, and the fact that accessible products and technological solutions exist for virtually all of the barriers facing disabled students and faculty. A campus must want to make these changes.[4]

To begin, top-level administrators must agree to undertake a comprehensive audit of all technology used by the institution so that barriers can be identified and solutions put in place.[5] The audit findings and the corrective actions must be made public to ensure accountability. Colleges and universities must make a commitment that all future purchases of technology will include an accessibility requirement.[6] Those staff and administrators who purchase products must signal to product developers that inaccessible products will not be purchased. As the Department of Justice and the Department of Education instructed through a "Dear College or University President" letter of June 29, 2010 (and as the Department of Justice required in agreements with colleges and universities that used inaccessible Kindle devices in violation of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and Titles II and III of the Americans with Disabilities Act), blind students and others with print disabilities must be able to "acquire the same information, engage in the same interactions, and enjoy the same services as sighted students with substantially equivalent ease of use."[7]

The legal landscape is clear, and the technology is available. It is the will and culture of higher education that must change (as must the will and culture of K-12) to ensure that students with disabilities enjoy the same benefits as their non-disabled peers. Leaders at universities and colleges must work with faculty to help them understand that demanding accessibility is *not* an affront to academic freedom. Faculty can continue to say and teach whatever they want. Requiring accessible technology is, however, a matter of civil rights.[8]

The issue can be simplified this way: no university or college today would even consider constructing a new building without ramps and other physical accessibility features. Likewise, no university or college today should even consider purchasing or designing digital technology without first ensuring that the product or system is accessible by all.

Notes

1. This student's story is based on the experiences of several blind students.

2. Several accessible transmitters or clickers are on the market, including the i>clicker (http://www.iclicker.com/). Vibrating i>clickers with Braille stickers are available but only if campus bookstores order them directly for students to buy.

3. Accessible learning management systems are available: e.g., Blackboard Learn, Release 9.1.

4. For an excellent "where to begin" on ensuring accessibility, see Jonathan Lazar's PowerPoint slides from "Improving Campus IT Accessibility," presentation, EDUCAUSE Mid-Atlantic Regional Conference, January 13, 2011, Baltimore, <http://www.educause.edu/sites/default/files/library/presentations/MARC11/SESS41/EDUCAUSE2011.ppt>.

5. For examples, see <http://www.w3.org/WAI/ER/tools/complete> and <http://webaim.org/>. To do a comprehensive audit, colleges and universities should employ blind students to serve as testers to determine if websites and other technologies used on campus are accessible.

6. Several colleges and universities have inserted such language in procurement agreements. For example, George Mason University has a webpage devoted to resources for ensuring accessibility in purchasing: <http://accessibility.gmu.edu/webaccessibility/index.html>.

7. The full letter can be found at <http://www.ada.gov/kindle_ltr_eddoj.htm>.

8. Several universities—including the California State University System, Drexel University, George Mason University, Utah State University, Towson University, and the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee—have already developed or are in the process of developing resources that can assist universities and colleges in taking on this legal obligation and exciting challenge. In addition, the National Federation of the Blind (http://www.nfb.org) is available as a resource to those who are interested in building partnerships to ensure that blind students enjoy equal access to all a campus offers.

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