

ACCESSIBLE FOR LIFE

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The Americans with Disabilities Act was originally signed into law in 1990 in the United States of America. The act was designed to protect the rights and liberties of individuals with disabilities. The main goal was to stop discrimination for those with disabilities whether in job searches, transportation, employment opportunities, public accommodations, telecommunications as well as government opportunities. Its goal has been to provide the same rights for a disabled person as for an able bodied person (“US Department of Labor,” 2014). Implementation of this act has been far more difficult than passing it in the first place. The ADA was recently updated in 2010 to include accessible design in buildings, parking, roadways and other areas. (“Information and technical,” 2014)

Over 56 million people in the United States, which is 1 in 5 or over 19% of the population of the United States has been determined to be disabled according to the last U.S. Census in 2010 (“Nearly 1 in,” 2012). The amazing fact that 60% of those with disabilities are unemployed, according to the 2010 Census. That is in comparison with 20% of the population that is noted as not disabled. Of those with disabilities that are unemployed, a large number are also suffering from severe poverty, which exacerbates the cyclic situation of the unemployed (“Nearly 1 in,” 2012).

One great thing that is more available now than ever before, is the access to secondary education to prepare those with disabilities for employment. With online access to classes, instructors and tutors, many with disabilities can now compete on a somewhat more fair scale than ever before. This also means that there is more access to resources

that accommodate the users disabilities. Many university and public libraries are working hard to make all services as accessible as possible both at the library and through the internet (University of Washington, 2014). The key feature for both the electronic information and for the physical libraries are both the concept of Universal Design. This is where a facility or service is specifically designed not to the average user but to what can be referred to as the differently-abled user. Libraries that employ this technique must consider designing their libraries to meet the needs of physically, visually, hearing, learning and sensory impaired (University of Washington, 2014).

Disabled Needs

When considering students needs for access to distance learning, close consideration must be paid to the individuals disabilities as well as their different abilities. That means that the specific item that delays or interferes with their learning must be first addressed and if they have a special adaptive ability they have developed to cope with their disability, those have to also be considered. An example of this would be if a person has a lack of hearing, they may adapt to reading lips as people speak to them. An online course would therefore need to either provide the class lectures and training in a written format, and/or with a visual of the instructor speaking TO the camera. All humans are capable of making minor modifications to make their lives better. This is inclusion of a coping mechanism that many disabled develop to better fit into mainstream society (Rowler, C., Burgsthaler, S., Smith, J., & Coombs, N. (2013)).

Modification Equipment

In the same manner that the type of disability and different adaptive abilities must be considered; the modified equipment that many disabled use must also be reviewed. With software such as “Dragon Speak” and “Kurtzweil”, many individuals with disabilities have basic computer systems with software modifications. These programs can write for the person, if they can train the computer to understand their speech patterns, and the programs can also read to the individuals if they have visual issues (“Unlock learners, 2014). There are many other new technologies that are now more affordable modifications both for the hardware and the software for the disabled community.

What must be developed for each disabled distance learner is the individualized accommodations that are a basic human right, especially with the support of the ADA.

Unfortunately, individualized accommodations require funding and assignment to government service groups, such as Vocational Rehabilitation. Due to a limit in funding, Vocational Rehabilitations throughout the United States are extremely constrained and can only provide services to individuals with extreme disabilities. Because of the fact that these individuals are normally extremely involved (more severely disabled), they most likely could not participate in secondary education programs such as colleges and universities (“Information and technical,” 2014). This leaves a large portion of the population without the services they would need to properly access and use online educational programs.

Distance and/or Online Learning

The programs available today for online learning can come through various resources, such as standard universities and colleges of the public and private sector as well as various other sources such as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) that include the Khan Academy, edX, and Coursera. Unfortunately, if the disabled individual wishes to use MOOC classes, there is no easy method to receive any type of accommodations yet.

The universities that are participating in online courses, such as the University of Southern Mississippi, work very closely with their internal programs such as the Office of Disabilities and Accommodations. All instructors are notified via an accommodation letter of the student's needs and accommodation requirements. The student is responsible to request what specialized items they may require, including support from the university library, tutoring, scheduling their testing with a scribe, and many other items. The student is responsible for acquiring and maintaining the hardware and software necessary to attend the online classes ("The University of, 2014). What many do not realize, is that the public library systems in the United States do provide some of the support for online class completion. Most public libraries will provide scribes and proctors for exams upon request, and many will make an effort to provide tutors and or identify contacts in the community to help with the learning process.

Technology, Distance Learning and the Library

The technology is a necessity to provide the basics for many of the disabled community to attend secondary education courses. Many disabled live below the poverty line

("Nearly 1 in, 2012) and do not have the resources necessary to meet the basic guidelines required for distance learning. If the disabled students find the support necessary to begin their educational quest, they must also receive the resources provided via the school or government to help them meet their goals.

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