

TECHNOLOGY USE

Putting the Pieces of Electronic and IT Accessibility Together: Building Partnerships to Meet the Challenge of 508

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Abstract

How do you make IT (information technology) accessible to students who are deaf and hard of hearing? You can't do it alone. Historically, disability support offices provided accommodations for students to access information. With the increased use of electronic information through the web, video, on-line courses, and audio podcasting the task of providing access is overwhelming. After a brief story of attempts to bring electronic and IT accessibility to the attention of one community college, this workshop provided a forum for participants to share their successes and barriers. Participants were encouraged to identify partners on their campuses to address the accessibility issues surrounding the growing electronic and IT environment.



Introduction

Electronic and IT accessibility solutions go beyond the responsibility of the disability support offices. Are the right people to address the issues even aware there are access barriers to overcome? Are they aware there are laws that impact purchasing and development? Electronic accessibility affects faculty, web designers, curriculum development, purchasing decisions, and many other areas of an institution. The presentation included an opportunity for participants to identify potential institutional partners to meet the challenges of electronic and IT accessibility, and identify strategies to influence institutional policies.

Background Information

I became the coordinator for the Resource Center for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing at Tulsa Community College in Tulsa, Oklahoma in 2003. Within a few weeks of being in the postsecondary setting, the issue of accessible electronic and information technology was on my desk. A CD accompanying a biology book was the problem. The next week I attended the Southeast Regional Institute on Deafness conference in Mobile, Alabama and thought I would find my answer there. I discovered inaccessible media was a growing problem and no one had the answer. Advances in technology provide many advantages but they can also present new barriers to accessing information. A few months later at the League Institute, a national conference for community colleges, I heard the numbers 5-0-8 for the first time. Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act requires federal agencies to have accessible electronic and information technology. Some states' interpretations of Section 508 included colleges and universities, and they embraced these

principles and implemented policies to support accessible media and web sites. Oklahoma interpreted Section 508 as applicable to federal agencies and not state agencies or postsecondary institutions. Legislative help was coming. Oklahoma ABLE Tech, the state assistive technology program, was actively pursuing state legislation to assure state compliance with Section 508. The Oklahoma Electronic and IT Accessibility Law was signed into law in April 2004. The Oklahoma law is a development and procurement law similar to Section 508, and it specifically mentions inclusion of postsecondary institutions. The two agencies named to implement the law and assure compliance were the Department of Central Services and the Office of State Finance. The law also established an advisory council, which worked to develop technical standards effective September 8, 2005.

Building Partnerships

Staff from Oklahoma ABLE Tech and a member of the State Regents for Higher Education shared the news of the Electronic and IT Accessibility law with attendees of the Oklahoma Association on Higher Education and Disabilities (OK-AHEAD) conference. Members of OK-AHEAD applauded the news. I was pleased the law placed the responsibility on development and purchasing and not designed as a retrofit for individual students by disability support offices. I soon discovered this news was not reaching others in the postsecondary setting. At our community college, the disability support staff seemed to be the only people who knew about the law. At the next meeting of OK-AHEAD, I learned other colleges and universities were experiencing the same feeling of being the only people on campus aware of the law. Statewide attempts to bring awareness were not proving to be effective in the postsecondary setting. Early training focused on purchasing procedures and web design for state agencies. Our challenge was to reach the distance learning program, library, media, faculty, and other stakeholders at the college to build partnerships to address accessibility and compliance of the new state law.

It was naïve to think that the first department I approached would embrace its responsibility and take over the efforts to bring the college into compliance with the laws. After several dead ends, I received some advice from a vendor at another conference who discovered that the library/media staff seemed to understand. I contacted our dean for library/media services. I met with him, provided a copy of the Oklahoma law, and waited to see what would happen next. Two weeks later, he contacted me. He recognized the college needed to move toward compliance. I consider this my first successful partnership. He was instrumental in establishing a committee to explore what impact the law may have on the college. The focus of the committee was later absorbed into a newly formed IT council. I accepted the invitation to join the council to bring awareness of the electronic and IT accessibility issue to the members. One of the members contacted me for additional information. He was in charge of our television programming and streaming video for distance learning. He recognized his department had a major role in college compliance and took responsibility for finding solutions. This was my second successful partnership. He understood it was no longer the sole responsibility of the disability support offices to provide accessible media. He took ownership of the situation and started building his own partnerships with vendors to address captioning for on-line courses and television broadcasts.

Any opportunity to bring awareness of the need to eliminate the barriers to access is worthwhile. My earlier unsuccessful attempts to find collaborators may have set the stage for future partnerships. Some puzzle pieces may not fit on the first attempt. You may need to try again to get the right match for successful partnerships.

Participant Concerns and Successes

The concerns shared at the conference centered around on-line and hybrid classes, faculty involvement, and captioning. Some successes shared include new state accessibility laws,

partnerships with instructional designers, free training resources, college funding for development and training, and college policies in place ensuring all media and textbooks are ADA compliant.

Strategies

- Identify the issue as a college wide responsibility and not limited to any one department.
- Identify potential partners including media, IT, faculty advisory boards, and vendors.
- Prioritize; the whole picture can be overwhelming.
- Take advantage of opportunities to bring awareness of the barriers.
- Form advisory groups that include different departments and/or agencies.
- Have a copy of the laws and technical standards available.
- Include students in the process as well as other end users.
- Build relationships with faculty.
- Create a task force.
- Work with faculty to incorporate accessibility into computer course curriculum.
- Offer to team with other departments to help them create accessible materials.

Laws

Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act), as amended by the Workforce Investment Act of 1998
August 7, 1998

Oklahoma State Law 2197, Electronic and Information Technology Accessibility Law, April 2004.

Resources

Section 508: The road to accessibility. <http://www.section508.gov/>

Oklahoma IT accessibility legislation and resources. <http://www.ok.gov/accessibility/>

Oklahoma ABLE Tech-IT access. http://www.ok.gov/abletech/IT_Access/index.html

