

Is online education a blessing for students with disabilities?

by Donald Asher

We've come a long way since activists for the disabled chained themselves to the front doors of buildings at universities nationwide. The protests of those students led to accessibility for today's students. It may be out back next to the garbage chutes, but major buildings have wheelchair access somewhere. In fact, colleges and universities nationwide now employ disability services specialists, to make sure that institutions accommodate the needs of their differently-abled students.

Yet, if you talk to any disability services specialist, they'll tell you that brick and mortar education still provides plenty of barriers. For one thing, the very concept of a disability has changed, and widened. Learning disabilities and mood disorders are hard to see, but are just as debilitating to students who live with them. Physical barriers blocking accessibility are an architectural problem with an architectural solution. The educational solution for a student with a severe mood disorder may be much harder to design.

Lay people often have difficulty understanding how relatively small accommodations can make a huge difference to these students. Some reading disorders, once diagnosed, can be treated with a simple cardboard aid. Once the student has a rectangular window to read one line at a time, her reading comprehension is equal to anybody's, although she may read slower. Allowing this person extra time for testing is not favoritism, but fairness.

Many students with disabilities get frustrated with being singled out, and they gravitate to online programs as a way of not appearing to be disabled. For others, the virtual world of online education resolves physical challenges that wheelchair ramps cannot solve. For example, if you're agoraphobic, a wheelchair ramp is not going to make buildings more accessible.

Maura Garrett of Olympia, Washington, is considering returning to college, and she is considering only online options. She suffers from clinical depression and chronic pain disorders, and she is the primary caretaker for her disabled life partner. Showing up in class at 9:00 a.m. on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday is out of the question for her. A veteran of online education, Maura will quickly tell you that it does not level the playing field after all.

Her first foray into online education resulted in a draw. She did fine in her classes, but withdrew before completing the program out of frustration with the process. "At my last college," she says, "we had a blind gentleman who was in charge of disabled student services, and he couldn't get accommodation for himself, to do his job. So you can imagine what we faced going through his office." She found faculty would agree to accommodations, then resent following through. "I think that they need to be more honest with students and within the administration about what really is promised vs. what can be delivered." Maura advises that it is critical to self-identify with professors and negotiate accommodation before classes begin.

In spite of these experiences, Maura is going to return to an online school. “Until my dying day, I’m going to go on. I don’t see a lot of choice. It’s my dream, and like most people who are disabled, I want to work, I want to have a life, I want to be able to pay a mortgage like everybody else. Disabled people don’t want to be heroes. They just want to go about living a normal life, whatever normal means for them.”

Jane Jarrow, a nationally prominent disabilities consultant based in Columbus, Ohio, who advises online educational institutions, says things are getting better for the disabled online. “A number of institutions are really trying,” she says. “The issue is that some of the online only institutions have done relatively little, and another problem is that there are many students with disabilities who gravitate to online programs because they believe their disability will be neutral in an online setting. But it’s not. They don’t realize that at the point of signing up, they need to tell the institution of their needs, and sometimes they don’t even anticipate those needs.”

As an example, she tells the story of a deaf student who signed up for a program without revealing his disability. Unexpectedly, the professor posted some film clips using the latest media technology. “This student needed these clips to be captioned or explained to him, and it was weeks into the program already. The student didn’t bring it up, and no one knew.”

One school that is doing a good job of integrating disability issues into online curriculum design is Kansas State University in Manhattan, Kansas, popularly known as K-State. Stacy Smith, an adaptive technology specialist with K-State’s Online Disability Services office, works closely with curriculum designers to use technology to solve disability access issues. “We’re groundbreakers in a way,” she says. “We’re lucky. The people who are developing the learning management system care about accessibility. When a student of mine runs into a problem, they do what they can to fix it. And if they can’t fix it for that student, they put it on the problem list to fix on the next update.”

Alan Muir, executive director of the Center for Career Opportunities for Students with Disabilities, a nationwide service based at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, argues that students should not avoid all brick-and-mortar experiences. “For some students, in very rural areas, or with certain disabilities, sure, that’s the best option. But for others, it is best to have as much social interaction as possible.” He suggests that students who want to be employable later need social development as well as cognitive development.

“A physical university may be able to do a better job [of serving these students],” says Alan. “More research has to be done, and more research has to be done by the online universities to see if they can provide accommodations and see if they can do it efficiently, in real time. This is all at an early stage, really.”

Just for the record, many disability activists argue that hiding people with disabilities from the general public does harm to both groups, which would support Alan’s argument

in favor of blending online education with brick-and-mortar classroom experiences, when possible.

For those students who, like Maura Garrett, want to work after completing their educations, Alan Muir calls attention to his nationwide job service matching students with disabilities with employment opportunities. With an unemployment rate approaching 70% (according to the ADA), persons with disabilities may need more than an education to reach their goals.

As a final thought, the ranks of the disabled are being swelled with thousands of returning veterans. Issues of disabled access to education, online or physical world, may become more critical than ever.

SIDEBAR

Tips for Students with Disabilities

1. Self-identify to the school, and get hooked up with the disability services officer. *Don't* think that online education neutralizes your disability.
2. Self-identify with each professor at the very beginning of class, before any problems or challenges arise. Discuss the curriculum and process in detail.
3. Be realistic about what you can and cannot do, so you don't find yourself overwhelmed by the work flow.
4. Don't take too many courses at a time, until you see how it will go.
5. Get promises from professors and the administration in writing; an email trail will suffice, so you can remind others of what they have agreed to do.
6. See what family members can do to help you succeed in your classes.

BIO

Donald Asher is a public speaker and writer specializing in careers and higher education. He is the author of eleven books, including *Cracking the Hidden Job Market*, *How to Get Any Job: Life Launch and Re-Launch for Everyone Under 30*, *The Overnight Resume*, *Asher's Bible of Executive Resumes*, and *Who Gets Promoted, Who Doesn't, and Why*. His web page is www.donaldasher.com. © 2010 Asher Associates.