A Virtual Commitment: Disability Services Information on Public Community College Websites

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Abstract

The research on students with disabilities has focused primarily on transition programs and the accessibility of information in the classroom environment. There is a dearth of studies that examine the accessibility of disability services information on community college websites for prospective students with disabilities. A researcher-developed content analysis instrument was used to collect data on 40 community college websites throughout the United States. The community college websites were analyzed on three dimensions including: (1) the accessibility of disability services information on community college websites, (2) the distance of information regarding disability services from the homepage, and (3) the accessibility and availability of disability services information that might be provided to students with disabilities via the website. The findings of this quantitative content-focused synthesis study suggest variations in the accessibility of disability services information on community colleges websites. The authors conclude the article by addressing implications for practice, policy and future research.

Keywords: Disability services, community colleges, websites, quantitative, students with disabilities

Postsecondary education is vital to individuals with disabilities. According to the National Council on Disability (2003), the earnings, quality of life, and employability of students with disabilities increase significantly due to their college attendance and degree attainment. Even with the aforementioned positive outcomes, individuals with disabilities have been underrepresented in postsecondary education. The U.S Census Bureau (2000) indicated that overall, as compared to K-12 students and the general population, students with disabilities remain underrepresented in all postsecondary institutional types. Low enrollment, in some cases, is the result of the shift of the responsibility of disclosing disability information from the school to the individual (Richard, 1995). Prior to coming to college, high school students are protected by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) of 2004, which indicates that secondary school districts are required to develop and provide programs and services in a least restrictive environment. Students in this environment are protected by multidisciplinary groups (Hadley, 2011). The collegiate environment,

however, does not provide the same amount of support that exists in the secondary educational environment. In fact, college students are protected under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990. In postsecondary environments, the responsibility lies on the student to initiate requests for certain services and resources. Students must self-identify themselves to the disability office, provide documentation of their disability and request accommodations needed, as well as be an advocate for themselves (Hadley, 2011). The literature also highlights stigmas associated with disclosing information regarding their disability as being a factor in the low representation (Kurth & Mellard, 2006).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (U.S. Department of Education, 2012), the number of individuals with disabilities enrolled in postsecondary education was 11% in both 2003-2004 and 2007-2008. The numbers of students with disabilities seeking and attending higher education is quickly rising. Burke, Friedl, and Rigler (2010) identified the 2008 reauthorization of the Americans

with Disabilities Act, the 2008 Higher Education Opportunity Act, and the Post-9/11 Veterans Educational Assistance Act of 2008 as having the potential to increase the number of students with disabilities in postsecondary education. In addition, the increase of students with disabilities on college campuses can be attributed to factors such as enhanced assistive and instructional technologies, expanded disability support services programs, increased public awareness of the capabilities of individuals with disabilities, and greater self-determination among students with disabilities (Prentice, 2002).

The largest portion of students with disabilities can be found in the community college environment. National data collected from degree-granting postsecondary institutions revealed that in 2008-2009, 707,000 students with disabilities were enrolled in postsecondary education with approximately half of these students in two-year institutions (Raue & Lewis, 2011). This may be in part to the ability of community colleges to offer "students from diverse stations in life the opportunity to begin careers in their chosen fields by helping them identify and achieve their individual goals and in making a difference in their lives" (Hart, Mele-McCarthy, Pasternack, Zimbrich, & Parker, 2004, p. 54). This percentage of students with disabilities enrolling in community colleges is anticipated to only increase. Consequently, community colleges face greater challenges in providing appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities (Quick, Lehmann, & Deniston, 2003), as they continue to serve a broad and diverse student population with limited resources.

As the number of individuals with disabilities attending community colleges increases, the number of prospective students using the world-wide web to locate information about particular colleges will increase as well. According to Irwin and Gerke (2004), "more than 65 percent of college-bound students reported that using the Web is more valuable than print resources to determine where they would like to go for postsecondary education" (p. 51). In fact, a recent study indicated that 85% of students with disabilities use computers (Irwin & Gerke, 2004). If we can assume from the aforementioned information that a large number of students with disabilities use institutional websites to search for colleges, then it is critical that more colleges attend to the accessibility of disability services information on their website. This increase in students with disabilities accessing higher education, coupled

with their possible utilization of institutional websites as an introduction into the community college environment, begs a closer examination of the accessibility component of information and resources for students with disabilities via community college websites.

The majority of the literature on students with disabilities focuses on the visibility and usability of content on websites and the role of transition programs for students with disabilities (Cummings, Maddux, & Casey, 2000). The role of technology and assistive technology in classrooms for students with disabilities is also discussed, indicating that the use of technology for students with disabilities is effective both academically and socio-emotionally (Heiman & Shemesh, 2012). Comparably, little attention is focused on what prospective students with disabilities see when exploring community college websites prior to enrolling. Due to the differences in the laws as it pertains to secondary and postsecondary education; students may be unaware of the services that are available to them and/or the process for obtaining certain services. Ensuring that this information is provided to them early in their search for an institution is vital in assisting in their overall adjustment to the postsecondary institution. In an article on preparing students with disabilities for the postsecondary experience, Gil (2007) stated that, "The more preparation they [students with disabilities] have prior to beginning their journey to postsecondary education, the greater the likelihood of a smooth transition" (p. 12). There is a dearth of research that focuses on the accessibility of information for prospective students with disabilities on community college websites and the type of information that students with disabilities will find on the respective websites.

This study explored an area that has not received much attention in higher education literature -- the accessibility and type of information on community college disability services websites for prospective community college students with disabilities. The findings of this study are essential to higher education organizations, specifically administrators, policy makers, student support professionals, website designers, and all individuals who are involved in the overall student experience. While there are varying definitions of accessibility, this study uses the definition as defined by the Job Accommodation Network ADA Glossary of Terms. Accessibility "refers to a site, facility, work environment, service, or program that is easy to approach, enter, operate, participate in, and/or use safely

and with dignity by a person with a disability" (Office of Disability Employment Policy [DEP], 2013, p. 1), and is conceptualized by the three areas as outlined in the methodology section of this study.

To gain insight into the accessibility component of information regarding disability services on 40 of our nation's community college websites, this study responded to the following two research questions:

1. How accessible is information about disability services on public community college websites?
2. What information will prospective students with disabilities find if they view the websites of public community colleges?

Methodology

Study Design

This quantitative research study is best categorized as descriptive of disability services websites within community colleges. The dearth of research literature on this topic means there is little basis for making predictions of the analysis. A content-focused synthesis can be used to develop answers to specific questions or add to our understanding of an issue (Majchrzak, 1984). A content-focused synthesis study focuses on a synthesis of information across data types, in this case disability service websites and information regarding disability services and resources on community college websites. The utilization of content-focused synthesis was used to focus on information, services, and resources of interest to students with disabilities through community college websites. The underlying framework for this study focuses on the information available on disability services on public community college websites. The analysis of the information available on these websites will serve as an attempt to understand the experiences that prospective students with disabilities will have when searching for information on disability services on the websites of 40 of public community colleges analyzed in this study.

Participant Selection

The goal of the selection process of participant sites for this study was to ensure representation from all states and regions as well as a variety of institutional sizes. Utilizing the *virtual face* sampling technique developed by Meyer and utilized in her studies (e.g.,

Meyer (2008a, 2008b) on the usefulness of college and university websites and the information they contain, a purposeful selection process was used, using three types of information. First, public community colleges were identified and grouped through The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education ™ website (http://classifications.carnegiefoundation.org/lookup_listings/institution.php). Second, the states of the community colleges were grouped by the four official regions of the United States used by the U. S. Census Bureau (n.d.): Northeast; Midwest; South; and West. From these groupings, a recursive process was followed to develop the sample of 40 institutions, to represent 40 different states (10 public community colleges from each of the four regions). The choice of 40 institutions was based on the desire of the researchers to have an equal number of institutions per region. Some states have a statewide community college system (versus independent institutions); these system institutions were not included in this study. Last, as the sample took shape, an effort was made to ensure that a variety of institution sizes were included. Therefore, the sample of 10 community colleges selected per region was purposefully drawn to maximize representation of different sizes of public community colleges based on the Carnegie Classification of Institutions (two very small, two small, two medium, two large, and two very large).

It is essential to note that the overall purpose of this study was to determine what prospective students with disabilities would find when exploring the websites of public community colleges across the United States; not to identify specific community colleges. Therefore, the name and identity of the community colleges were not included in the findings of this study. It is also important to mention that the purpose of this study was not to highlight specific disabilities but to rather provide a general picture of what students with disabilities would find on community college websites. Essential information may vary depending on the disclosed disability.

It was not the intent of this research to identify individual home pages of disability services offices within individual institutions, so the remainder of the study will focus on the collective characteristics of the community college sample as a whole. The name of an individual institution will not be associated with any result.

Instrumentation

The research team, which consisted of two faculty members with a large amount of knowledge on website usage and development, analyzed the website of all 40 community colleges within each of the four regions. The team was limited to two team members to ensure validity and reliability of the information obtained. The team members completed a written researcher-developed content analysis instrument individually. The instrument included information regarding the access and location of the disability services homepage and information provided regarding disability services and accommodations. More specifically, the researcher-developed content analysis instrument, which was used by both team members, was divided into three sections. The first section focused on the accessibility of disability services websites. This section included locating the website via following the links from the institution's homepage as well as using the search feature. The second section focused on the location and distance of disability services from the homepage. More specifically, this section focused on the number of clicks from the homepage of each community college. The third and final section focused on disability services information. This section explored the type of information that was available and provided on the website for prospective students. In short, each community college's homepage was examined to determine the following:

1. The ease of accessing the disability services website:
   a. from the institution's homepage; and
   b. from the search feature (if available).
2. The distance of the disability services website from the homepage.
3. The accessibility and availability of information on services that might be provided to students with disabilities.

After the content analysis instruments were completed, the findings among the team members were shared and compared. Any discrepancies that emerged as a result of the comparisons were further explored through the reexamination of the websites. Using Cohen's Kappa, interrater reliability of $k = 1$ was reached on the findings.

Because this study is exploratory, the analysis was largely descriptive and used frequencies and percentages. The purpose of the analysis was to understand what prospective students with disabilities would find if they explored the website of 40 public community colleges across the United States.

Findings

This study examined 40 community college websites across the U.S. to determine the accessibility of disability services information for prospective and current students. As previously mentioned, the community colleges examined in this study represent community colleges from each of the four regions of the U.S. (Northeast, Midwest, South, and West).

Accessibility of Information about Disability Services

In response to the first research question, the community colleges websites were examined on multiple levels. The first level consisted of the ease of locating the disability services website from the main college site. The research team explored links from the community college homepages and followed each link to identify disability services websites and disability services information. Of the 40 community colleges analyzed, the majority (40%, n = 16) of landing pages for the disability services websites were accessible via two clicks from the institution's homepage. About 1/3 or 30% (n = 12) were accessible via three clicks, and 10% (n = 4) were accessible via four clicks from the institution's homepage. One community college's (2.5%) disability services landing page was accessible via five clicks from the institution's homepage. Only 10% (n=4) of the community colleges represented in this study had direct links to the land page of the disability services website via the college's homepage. With this said, in instances where the disability services' link to the website was accessible from the homepage, three of the links were located at the bottom of the homepage and were not visible from the landing page. An individual would have to scroll down to the very bottom of the page to see the link. Only one community college had a direct link to the disability services website located visibly on the left hand side of the homepage. The remaining three did not have a disability services website.

The study also examined the accessibility of information on disability services on the community college websites via the search feature using key words that students would possibly use to identify disability service resources were used in the search feature of the

Table 1

Accessibility of Disability Websites

Number of Clicks to Access the Disability Website Frequency Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
1 Click from the homepage (Disability services link on the home page)	4	10%
2 Clicks from the homepage	16	40%
3 Clicks from the homepage	12	30%
4 Clicks from the homepage	4	10%
5 Clicks from the homepage	1	2.5%
No Disability website	3	7.5%

websites. The key words included: *disability services, students with disabilities, student support services, current students, prospective students, resources, and campuses services*. Based on the key word search, a small percentage (7.5%, n = 3) of the community colleges in this study did not have a disability services landing page. Of the 37 community colleges with a disability services landing page, the site could be accessed via the search feature from all of the community colleges' websites with the exception of one college. One community college did not have a search feature but did have an A-Z option where information on disability services could be found. After locating information on disability services, the breadcrumb navigation information provided at the top of the web page was examined. Interestingly, whether following the links from the community college homepages or using the search feature, only 10% (n=4) of information on disability resources could be located from multiple paths.

Distance of disability services website. The distance of information regarding disability services from the homepage of the community colleges websites was also examined. The location of information on disability services from the homepage varied. Of the 37 community colleges with disability services landing pages, the majority were listed under the categories of Current students (27%, n = 9) and Students (15%, n =

6). There were a variety of other categories also used. See Table 2 for a breakdown of the various headings among the community colleges that did not have a direct link via the college's homepage. Four community colleges had a disability services' link directly from the homepage, and three did not have disability services websites but did have information in other locations on the website (e.g.,TRiO student support services website, special support services website, and in the student handbook).

Disability Services Information Provided

In response to the second research question, an exploration of disability services landing pages as well as sites with information on disability services were examined. Among the community colleges with disability services websites, the websites had varying titles. The titles included Disabled Student Programs and Services; Disability Resource Center; Student Disability Services; Disability Services; Students with Disabilities; Disability Support Services; and Services for Students with Disabilities. Out of the 40 community colleges examined, 17.5 % (n = 7) provided forms, including accommodation request forms, medical release forms, note taking forms, testing forms, alternative learning forms, student assistance forms, housing forms, and parking forms. Of the 40 community

Table 2

Location of Disability Services Website from the Community College Home Page

Location of Disability Services Website from the Community College Homepage	Frequency	Percentage
Support Services	1	3%
Students	6	18%
College resources	2	6%
Student life	2	6%
Academic	1	3%
Current students	9	27%
On campus services	1	3%
Academic and career services	1	3%
Resources for students	1	3%
Offices	1	3%
Student services	3	9%
University center	1	3%
Services	2	6%
Campus Services	1	3%
Student experience	1	3%

Note. Four institutions had direct links to disability services via the community college's homepage. Three institutions had no disability services website

colleges, 92.5% (n = 37) had some level of information regarding the services offered for students with disabilities and contact information. Out of the remaining three community colleges, one community college only listed information and resources for faculty teaching students with disabilities; one stated that information would be provided and accommodations would be made on an individual basis; and the last community college only stated that students with disabilities were to visit with their instructors about needed accommodations.

Discussion

The findings of this study aligned with previous studies, such as Irwin and Gerke (2004) and Quick et al. (2003). In their examination of Liberal Arts Colleges, Irwin and Gerke found that information regarding disability services was "difficult or impossible to locate from several of the websites" (para. 5). The homepages of the community college websites explored in this study were plentiful regarding information for current students, prospective students, and for faculty and staff. This information ranged from varying student success programs, academic services, registration information, and housing information. However, only 4 of the 40 (10%) community college websites had direct links to the disability services website from the institution's homepage. Among the four community colleges with direct disability services links from the homepage, only one of the links was visible without having to scroll down the page to see the link. The remaining three had links at the bottom of the homepage. Most prospective or current students could possibly overlook the disability services link at the bottom of the community college's homepage.

As previously mentioned, the majority of the community colleges did not have a direct link to the disability services website from the college's homepage. Without a direct link, students are forced to locate the information by either guessing which link to click from the college's homepage that would lead to information on disability services, or by using the search feature if available, hoping to choose the correct key words to find the needed information. A considerable amount of time was spent when trying to guess which link to click on to begin locating disability services information within this study's 40 community colleges. Of the 40 community college websites analyzed, at least 15 different named links were identified that lead to the disability services websites/information. The named

links were identified via information obtained from the two processes as noted above: 1) exploring and following the links from the community college homepages, and 2) using key words, as identified above, in the search feature. As a result, a frequent challenge in conducting this study was determining which link to click on from the community college's homepage to find the desired information. As individuals that are familiar with higher education terminology, it was still very challenging to locate the information. Taking into consideration that potential students may not be native higher education speakers, it is possible that potential students with disabilities will give up on the hunt to find the information they need.

Once accurately selecting the link from the homepage, the disability services websites were between two and five clicks away from the community college's homepage (see Table 1), with the majority of the disability services websites being two to three clicks away. Additionally, when utilizing the search feature, multiple sites were generated, each leading to different information. It is essential to note that when the disability services websites were located, the majority of the sites had useful information for students.

Within a few community colleges, the information provided on the websites for students with disabilities, was limited to information regarding 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990. Of the 40 community colleges, 42.5% (n = 17) of disability services sites included additional information such as forms, accommodation request information and information regarding the specific disabilities served, and resources available for students with disabilities.

Limitations

There are three identified limitations of this study. The first is the small sample size. While 40 community college websites were used in this study, a future study should be conducted that includes a larger sample size and a wider representation and inclusion of community college websites. Second, the findings of this study are limited to the information on disability services that is available on the 40 community college websites. Only the checkpoints of web accessibility that can be examined by a computer were studied. Many other checkpoints may require accessibility that is granted after enrolling in the respective institution. In other words,

additional information may be accessible to students who have an institutional username and password or those who have identified themselves to the community college as a student with a disability. Third, individuals with no disclosed disability viewed the community college websites. Perhaps additional information, as it relates to the accessibility of disability services information, would have emerged with the assistance of students who are members of this population.

Conclusions and Implications

The results and implications of this study are significant for higher education institutions. The results highlighted the need to understand the essential role of institutional websites in providing information that supports the educational pursuits of all students, more specifically students with disabilities. With the possibility of a large portion of students with disabilities using computers (Friedman, 2004) and seeking information from institutional websites as an introduction to the community college, this is a critical point in which prospective students with disabilities may decide whether the institution is a comfortable choice for them.

According to Milsom and Hartley (2005), when students are preparing for college, it is imperative that students with disabilities feel a sense of commitment from the institution and that support services are available to them. The results of this study indicate that, overall, community colleges could do a better job of ensuring that the structure of their institutional website is user friendly for all students. Ensuring that the disability services website, information and resources are easily accessible via the institution's homepage is beneficial not only to students with disabilities, but to all students as well as to the community colleges themselves. When information for students with disabilities is available and accessible to all students, students with no identified or disclosed disability are able to become knowledgeable regarding the resources that are available, in the event that they may believe they have a disability. Additionally, this knowledge also implies a greater commitment to the success of students with disabilities. When information is accessible for students with disabilities and they are able to locate this information independently, it allows them to develop and increase their independence and self-determination skills, which are essential for students with disabilities (Brinckerhoff, McGuire, & Shaw, 2002). This could be accomplished by adding a direct link to information on disability services from the institution's homepage in a prominent place that is easily visible and accessible. In instances where the link cannot be accessible via the homepage, perhaps an identifiable consistent message or link among community colleges could be made available. For example, the disability services link could always be found under the "current student" or "prospective student" category to allow for consistency among community colleges. This type of consistency will assist in alleviating feelings of isolation and withdrawal (Hadley, 2011) that may occur even before the student enrolls in the community college.

While all institutional websites are designed to reflect the unique, distinct personalities of each community college, universal design should be the key focus when structuring websites. According to Irwin and Gerke (2004), "most prospective students have a limited understanding of the hierarchy of the campus; therefore the website should include the use of links to disability services from multiple paths" (p. 58). The findings of this study indicated that a small number of community colleges had direct links to information on disability services. In fact, while following links from the home page and using the search feature, the majority of the information on disability services could only be found via one path. A small percentage (n = 4, 10%) of the community college websites had multiple paths that lead to information on disability services. With information on disability services only being available via one or a minimum number of paths, the opportunity for students with disabilities to easily locate information via terms that may be familiar to them is limited.

Additionally, when information is available via multiple paths, students are able to have a holistic experience. In other words, their disability is incorporated into the structure of the website and not one that sets them apart from the student experience. The students are then able to gain knowledge and information regarding disability services while locating information that is specific to the academic and social life of a student. Universal design allows for the structure of websites to be more accessible to a greater number of students, thus minimizing the need of individuals with disabilities to advocate for access and essential resources (McGuire, Scott, & Shaw, 2004). The commitment to all students becomes an institutional commitment in all aspects of the learning environment (McGuire et al., 2004). It is also essential that information that is provided on institutional websites is consistent. In

our examination of the 40 community college websites, inconsistent information was identified among specific community college websites. These inconsistencies can possibility cause students to become confused and view the institution as not having a commitment to the success of students with disabilities.

The results of this study are also essential for policy makers. While this study represents a small number of our nation's community colleges, the implications are essential in the efforts to ensure the success of students with disabilities. It is paramount that community colleges develop universal web development policies that ensure accessibility of the content among all students-prospective and current. Irwin and Gerke (2004) suggest a six-step process of ensuring the websites are accessible:

1. Adopt a Web accessibility policy;
2. Develop a plan to implement that policy;
3. Broadly disseminate the policy and plan to anyone developing Web pages, including faculty and students;
4. Include a reasonable timeline in the plan for implementation of Web accessibility;
5. Include measures for enforcement in the plan; and
6. Make training and resources on accessible Web design available to Webmasters (pp. 57-58).

The results of this study also yield essential information for future research. There is no doubt that the representation of students with disabilities is increasing on our college campuses. With community colleges being at the forefront of this increase, further research needs to be conducted that focuses specifically on the experiences of students with disabilities while exploring community college websites. For example, how do students with disabilities feel when exploring the community college's website? How well do community college websites convey a commitment to students with disabilities? Additionally, research that seeks to understand exactly what students with disabilities are looking for when exploring community college websites is helpful in gaining a reference point and an essential direction when structuring institutional websites for usability and accessibility. Higher education administrators and policy makers, student support professionals, and website designers are encouraged to conduct research on their institutional websites as important information dis-

semination centers, but also to contribute to the growing literature and implications on ways to not only increase the representation of students with disabilities at our nation's community colleges, but also ways to ensure that our institutional websites convey the commitment that is held in educating our students with disabilities.

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