

**RESOLUTION IN SUPPORT OF ENHANCING WORLDWIDE
WEB ACCESS FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES**

Submitted for: Action.

Summary: At its February 2004 meeting, the Illinois Board of Higher Education established a Disabilities Advisory Committee to advise it on ways to improve services to students with disabilities. As part of that committee's activities, it was determined that the Board can play a valuable role in promoting Internet access for students with disabilities.

Action Requested: That the Board of Higher Education approves the resolution encouraging Illinois public universities to continuously improve Worldwide Web access for students with disabilities.

STATE OF ILLINOIS
BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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Background

In February 2004, the Disabilities Advisory Committee (DAC) was established to address three goals: (1) review web accessibility issues for students with disabilities; (2) develop common metrics for collecting information about students with disabilities; and (3) develop a clearinghouse of information for students with disabilities and their families in order to aid in the transition from secondary to post-secondary education. This report and accompanying resolution are a direct result of the Committee's work towards accomplishing Goals One and Three.

The Need for Web Accessibility in Higher Education

In 2003, the National Council of Disability published a paper, *Persons with Disabilities and Postsecondary Education*, in which it was noted that persons with disabilities remain underrepresented in postsecondary institutions 25 years after implementing the Rehabilitation Act and 13 years following the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). In addition, persons with disabilities are often frustrated and discouraged by the range of quality and availability of campus support services. Studies show that these students are less likely to graduate and therefore less likely to find employment that would enable them to enjoy financial independence.

The information age has introduced new accessibility barriers to people with disabilities in the form of electronic resources such as Internet access to the World Wide Web (web). Institutions are rapidly making the web the primary, and in many cases, their only means of communication with students, faculty and staff for many types of administrative and educational information. The web has a tremendous potential to help people with disabilities to become more independent and provide them with a greater number of opportunities in society, but only if the web resources are designed to meet their needs.

Unfortunately, colleges and universities have tended to follow the trend of developing and deploying electronic offerings without first considering equal access. This strategy too often has the effect of alienating those depending on their respective institutions to provide an integrated electronic environment and whose educational experience would be enhanced by effective assistive technologies. If this trend continues, assistive technology users will gravitate only toward those institutions exhibiting leadership in providing support for their electronic needs. Considering the large disabled population requiring equal electronic access, the implementation of necessary assistive technologies not only provides a means for increasing student enrollment and retention numbers of the growing student population that relies on assistive technologies, but also adheres to such legislative mandates as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Rehabilitation Act.

Benefits of Accessible Design to All Users

Curb cuts in sidewalks and ramps into buildings have benefited more persons than only those who use wheelchairs. They help delivery people moving merchandise on carts, people pushing children in strollers, and make it much easier for people who are older get into and out of buildings and streets. The same is true of making web resources more accessible to people with disabilities. Features designed to assist individuals with disabilities also serve generally to enable more people to use a wider range of web browsing technologies and capabilities to access web content. For example, people using portable digital assistants (PDAs) and cell phones have much smaller screens and want web content to adjust to the width of the smaller screen, just as persons with visual impairments want to increase the font size of a web resource in a graphical browser like Internet Explorer and to have web content adjust to the width of the screen. These types of features are not only “accessible” designs aimed at persons with disabilities, but also “user-centered” designs that allow all users to adjust styles to meet their individual needs. User centered design will only increase in importance as the population ages and the diversity of technological devices used to access web content increases.

Resolution

To address the increasing need for user-centered web designs, the Committee recommends the Board endorse the following resolution:

Be it resolved

That the Illinois Board of Higher Education strongly supports and encourages Illinois public universities to continuously improve Worldwide Web access for students with disabilities.

That the Illinois Board of Higher Education will:

- 1) *Encourage each public university to: (a) identify the current state of its web accessibility; (b) collaborate in efforts to develop a statewide support network and knowledge base; and (c) develop, between Fall 2005 and Spring 2006, a detailed plan to continuously improve the institution's Worldwide Web accessibility (including specific annual goals and activities; publicity, administration, instructional and departmental web service; and purchasing requirements for web services and tools);*
- 2) *Encourage Illinois' public universities to work aggressively toward implementing a common standard for Worldwide Web accessibility;*
- 3) *Initiate development, by January 2005, of a Web presence to provide information about resources such as training initiatives, procurement guidelines, assessment tools, and effective practices;*
- 4) *Support a statewide training initiative to be conducted between April and August 2005;*
- 5) *Encourage institutional collaboration by fostering various forms of communication, including a chat room, listserv, and other appropriate methods;*
- 6) *Require that institutions report on the status of their Worldwide Web accessibility as part of the annual Underrepresented Groups Report (beginning with reports submitted in the winter of 2006).*