Accessibility of Postsecondary Distance Education for Students with Disabilities: An Analysis of Policy and Practice in the California State Community Colleges

Statement of the Problem

Issue

Postsecondary education is increasingly a prerequisite to obtaining quality employment as the demand for highly educated and skilled workers rises in the United States. While people with disabilities are at a disadvantage for obtaining both postsecondary education and employment, employment rates go up dramatically as education level rises (Stodden & Dowrick, 2000). One of the four areas of study at the National Center for the Study of Postsecondary Educational Supports, towards the goal to improve access and remove barriers to postsecondary education for students with disabilities, is to identify promising technologies, to find barriers to their provision and adoption, and to explore policy and practice to overcome those barriers (Stodden, 1998).

Distance education is a rapidly growing phenomenon that has the potential to increase postsecondary-level access and participation. In the U.S., the numbers of courses offered and people enrolled in them both doubled in the three-year period from 1994-95 to 1997-98 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000). The main reason for this phenomenal growth is that internet-based instruction can remove geographical and physical barriers to postsecondary education, with the promise that people can learn "anytime, anywhere." Distance education can reduce or eliminate certain disability-related barriers, including sensory, mobility, learning and psychological issues, thereby increasing access to postsecondary education for people with disabilities (Child, 1989; Burgstahler; 1995 Paist, 1995).

However, distance education raises a new set of issues: students need to have access to the appropriate technologies; student services may not be widely available; and faculty will need technological support. Moreover, some disabilities require the use of adaptive technologies to access distance education media. As web-based instruction grows, educators should note that 98 percent of all Internet websites are not fully accessible to people with disabilities (McGrane, 2000). Access to postsecondary education is an ethical and a legal issue (Woodbury, 1998) that has been guaranteed for people with disabilities by both federal and state governments. The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 mandates that people with disabilities be provided with equal access to all public programs—this
includes educational programs offered on the Internet.

Policies and procedures developed for traditional modes of educational delivery need to be scrutinized and, if necessary, modified or replaced before they are applied to distance education practices. In recognition of these different needs, new and more stringent standards of national accreditation are being developed for postsecondary distance education (Carnevale, 2000). Equal and effective access to distance education for people with disabilities must be ensured, adapting the existing approaches as necessary, or the opportunity to obtain a postsecondary education through distance learning may be denied to those who could most benefit. This concern was voiced by the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights (OCR) in a letter to the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (CCCCO): “Little attention is being given to ensure that these distance learning programs are accessible to students with disabilities, especially students with visual impairments” (CCCCO, 1999).

Postsecondary institutions are beginning to address the need for equity in distance education. The California Community Colleges (CCC's) recently adopted the Distance Education: Access Guidelines for Students with Disabilities, delineating the college system's policy and describing specific accessibility practices (CCCCO, 1999). This policy offers a high standard of accessibility: “[T]he issue is not whether the student with the disability is merely provided access, but the issue is rather the extent to which the communication is actually as effective as that provided to others” (CCCCO, 1999). If successful, these efforts in California to provide equal access to distance education for students with disabilities could offer a model for other systems of postsecondary education.

Questions for Analysis
- What expected effects will the CCCCO distance education policy have on improving access to postsecondary education and successful outcomes for people with disabilities in the CCC system?
- How will progress be measured?
- What are the main issues concerning the accessibility of postsecondary distance education courses for students with disabilities in the CCC system?
- How will necessary supports and accommodations be provided in CCC distance learning courses to meet the standard of equally effective communication for all students?
- Will faculty be responsible to ensure distance learning course accessibility?
- Is this a promising strategy to meet the accessibility goals?
- How might a better understanding of distance education accessibility policy and practice in California's community college system help increase postsecondary access and success for students with disabilities?

Study Plan
The first step is a careful analysis of the accessibility of distance learning in the CCC system. This will involve a review of available literature, reports, data, student experiences, and other relevant information. The primary issues are expected to include student access to technology, provision of supports and accommodation, effectiveness of course materials, communications, and enrollment.

Next will be an analysis of the CCCCO policy on the accessibility of distance education including: the potential impact of
A report will be prepared, summarizing the results of this study and offering recommendations on the policy regarding the accessibility of distance education in the CCC system. A nationally recognized expert in postsecondary distance education for students with disabilities will help to guide the analysis and to prepare the final report. These findings may prove useful both locally, as the policies are implemented and assessed, and nationally. By sharing promising practices and potential difficulties this may help guide other postsecondary distance education providers to address the needs of students with disabilities. The report will be of interest to postsecondary student disability service providers, students with disabilities, technical staff, faculty, administrators, and others who are working on the development of postsecondary distance education.

Work plan for Study 11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Completion Date</th>
<th>Product/Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Develop study proposal</td>
<td>Oct 2000</td>
<td>Study proposal approved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review articles, reports and data on distance education accessibility in CCC</td>
<td>Dec 2000¹</td>
<td>Initial findings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review documents and articles on CCCCCO distance education policy and guidelines</td>
<td>Jan 2001¹</td>
<td>Initial findings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact/question local CCC experts and faculty</td>
<td>Feb 2001</td>
<td>Contact information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyze information collected on distance education policy and practice in CCC</td>
<td>Mar 2001</td>
<td>Analysis completed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prepare draft of findings report</td>
<td>April 2001</td>
<td>Report draft</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Submit report draft for expert validation</td>
<td>May 2001</td>
<td>Expert feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complete final findings report</td>
<td>May 31, 2001</td>
<td>Final report/findings brief</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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¹The data collection phase for these tasks was extended beyond the dates in the initial work plan for this study. The timeline for all subsequent tasks has been adjusted accordingly.
Reference List


