

Federal Government Convenes Commission to Help College and Graduate Students with Disabilities

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For the first time in history, a Secretary of Education, Secretary Arne Duncan, appointed a government advisory commission to investigate the accessibility of instructional materials for college and graduate students with disabilities. The Commission issued its report on December 6, 2011, and it contained 19 recommendations for improvement.

The government brought together nineteen individuals from various fields to serve a one year appointment. Commission members included leaders in accessible technology, Federal officials including the Assistant Secretary of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services and the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights, as well as social entrepreneurs such as the Presidents of Book Share, Learning Ally - RFD&D, National Council for Learning Disabilities, and the Association on Higher Education and Disability - AHEAD. Other prominent individuals with visual and learning disabilities were also appointed to the Commission.

The mere act of bringing these individuals together provided the opportunity for significant beneficial change. Some of the most pressing questions were: Has the free market provided adequate access to printed material? What accommodations are possible within the limits of technology? How can this be done without harming the publishing industry? The commissioners also explored the synergy of the individuals in the room in order to create positive change through volunteer compliance.

Through national public hearings, citizens had the opportunity to testify as to what is being experienced by the print disabled population and their supporting communities. Also, suggestions were made as to what is needed to allow all individuals to reach their educational potential.

“This report will be a valuable resource in improving our ability to better serve students with disabilities,” states Dr. Alexa Posny, Assistant Secretary of the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services.

Among the nineteen recommendations given to Congress are: (1) To produce text in a format that allows the print disabled community to have access without the need for conversion, (2) To create a single website where individuals can identify in which format a specific text is available, (3) To convey the need for Congress to authorize the United States Access Board to establish guidelines for accessible instructional material. I am excited to report that publishers and Congress are already moving on the Commission’s recommendations.

“This commission report will be a milestone in accessibility in postsecondary education. Organizations and individuals can refer to this document which provides benchmarks of standards of care,” says co-commissioner Mark Riccobono, Executive Director of the National Federation of the Blind.

Please help us let others know about this work and the existence of this report.

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The above article represents Linda Tessler's own opinion.