

Chapter 52

Resourcing Equity for Online Learners: Supporting Students–with–Limitations

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ABSTRACT

As postsecondary online learning opportunities continue to expand and interest in such opportunities continues to increase, online course and program developers and instructors will more frequently be faced with students from culturally diverse backgrounds, students with educational and physical limitations, and students with socioeconomic barriers. This chapter will provide a review of existing research related to online education, including a discussion of the gaps in research as related to online postsecondary learning. An exploration of the issues related to providing online instruction to diverse populations of students who come to higher education with educational accommodation needs, as well as students whose many cultures have communication styles, expectations, and etiquette that may differ from person to person, is also included. The chapter concludes with suggestions for improvements as well as emerging trends in creating and maintaining equity in online course and program delivery.

INTRODUCTION

In his forward to a text about online education, Parker states that there is a philosophy of learning “that is based on creating a safe place for learning focused on the needs of the learner” (Hanna, Glowacki-Dudka, & Conceição-Runlee, 2000). Such a philosophy takes on new significance

when postsecondary online instructors, program and course design specialists and online education administrators consider the needs of students, particularly those who do not fit the traditional profile. The development of Internet-based higher education programs and courses has birthed the global classroom, where students with different styles of learning can come together in collaboration. This global classroom experience is further complicated

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by a lack of cultural neutrality (McLoughlin & Oliver, 1999), where the term ‘culture’ can be used as a catch-all to include differences in race and ethnicity, age, gender, physical ability, and learning style.

As online programs and courses provide college and university students with alternatives to lecture-style, face-to-face education, educators are called upon to develop content that not only meets accreditation standards but also delivers the promised learning objectives to all students. Postsecondary institutions have different challenges related to accessibility due to the fact that their incoming students are not automatically followed by the identified goals that were a part of a special education Individualized Education Program (IEP) from their primary (identified for the purposes of this chapter as grades kindergarten through 8) or secondary (identified as grades 9 through 12) education. College and university admissions documentation provide instruction for prospective students who wish their high school IEP to follow them into higher education but ultimately the decision rests with the student with regard to which classes and instructors are made aware of the need for accommodation. As a result, many faculty members are unaware of the education needs of all of the students in their classes. When students whose first language may not be the language in which the online class is provided are considered, the concepts of equity and accommodation become further complicated.

This chapter provides a review of existing research related to online education, including a discussion of the gaps in research as related to online postsecondary learning. There is an exploration of the issues related to providing online instruction to diverse populations of students, along with suggestions for design and implementation improvements. A discussion of emerging trends in creating and maintaining equity in online course and program delivery and assessment is included.

BACKGROUND

Special Education

A discussion related to online higher education’s population of students with special needs in the United States would not be complete without a brief overview of the history of special education in general. The education of children in the United States with disabilities was not considered in the compulsory education laws of the 19th century. The Constitution made each state responsible for individual laws related to public education and the supreme courts in each state were at times called upon to decide whether the laws excluded students with special needs. The inclusion of children with special needs was not added to most state legislation until the late 1960s and early 1970s (Yell, Rogers, & Rogers, 1998), with federal legislation being enacted to create a more comprehensive law. Early federal legislation was expanded through the years to include the Individualized Education Program (IEP) that remains today as the primary support document for public education students with special needs. In addition to programs that advance inclusion within the public school system for students with special needs, Lange and Sletten (2002) found that many students, particularly those with social and emotional needs, have chosen to complete their education at alternative schools. These two researchers discovered that while alternative schools traditionally offer smaller class sizes as well as more individualized attention, special needs students drop out of school at higher rates than their colleagues in the general school population who did not have special needs. The study of elementary and secondary school success among special needs students is not a focus of this chapter, but it is important to note that success and preparation in primary levels of education often support success in postsecondary education (Ferrari & Parker, 1992; Pike & Saupe, 2002; Sadler & Tai, 2001; Stanley, 1971). United States colleges and universities are not held to

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