

Executive Summary

“Bridging the Gap to Accessible Educational Materials”

OBJECTIVES

The central objective of this proposal is to improve access to educational materials and programming. Toward this end, it highlights current issues, provides solutions for addressing accessibility challenges, and establishes minimum technical standards for accessible course design.

BENEFITS

The recommendations outlined in this report will move Mason closer to fulfilling its core values of placing students first and highlighting the strength that comes from a diverse, accessible, and inclusive academic community, while helping manage efficiently the overall financial and (staff time) costs of addressing the challenges of complying with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA); the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Virginia Information Technology Accessibility Standards (VITA), which are based on Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

CURRENT ISSUES

Below is an overview of challenges that have been identified. These issues are explained in depth in the accompanying report.

E-Learning Technology – Faculty and staff incorporate newer technologies in their courses, but many of these technologies do not incorporate accessibility features in their design. This results in students with sensory impairments being denied access to course materials or having delayed access.

Non-inclusive Practices – Many faculty members do not have accessibility as a part of their frame of reference when it comes to procuring, creating, and using course materials. The emerging use of e-learning and information technologies in the classroom demands that faculty include accessibility as a part of course design, as opposed to the current practice of waiting for a student with a disability to enroll in a course, then modifying the materials.

Compliance – In recent years, many institutions (e.g. [Louisiana Tech University](#), [Florida State University](#), [Daytona State College](#), [Penn State University](#), [South Carolina Technical College System](#), [Creighton University](#), [University of Montana](#)) have faced litigation and/or programmatic reviews by the Department of Justice (DOJ) and/or the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights (OCR) for failing to ensure equivalent access to websites, information technology, and other e-learning technologies for individuals with sensory impairments at higher education institutions.

Course Delivery – There is no systematic way of determining that course content is accessible: videos captioned and course documents (e.g., PPTs, PDFs, etc.) readily accessed by

students with sensory impairments. This is a significant issue as individuals that use screen-reading software and/or require captions for videos are unable to fully participate in a course that uses inaccessible e-learning technology.

Awareness – Many students, staff, and faculty are unaware of the need to incorporate accessibility into their courses, programs, and/or services. Despite efforts to educate faculty, staff, and departments about providing equivalent access to course materials, a larger university-wide strategy is necessary to ensure that each individual at Mason understands their role and responsibility toward providing a welcoming and inclusive academic environment.

Procurement – Many faculty and staff members with purchasing authority are unaware of the need to go through the Architectural Standards Committee (ASC) Review. The ASC review process addresses all requests for new development, installation, and/or the integration of applications at George Mason University. Many of these technologies have a significant impact on accessibility and equivalent access to Mason programs and services.

Cost Efficiencies – While additional staffing, training, and changes in standard practice can address many of Mason's accessibility challenges, others are more efficiently managed with enterprise-wide solutions. Though costly in some cases, these solutions can effectively streamline the delivery of IT services, including accessibility, from both an academic and administrative standpoint.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Establish a minimum set of technical standards (e.g., captioning of videos, labeling of images in electronic documents) with respect to the accessibility of e-learning and information technologies used in Mason classrooms.
- Encourage inclusive course design practices amongst administration, academic departments, faculty/staff, libraries, and ITU.
- Ensure equivalent access to all online courses by improving faculty training and adding accessibility as part of the course review process.
- Improve strategies for marketing and promoting the design, development, and purchase of accessible e-learning and information technologies.
- Consistently incorporate accessibility language into contracts and software license agreements to ensure that Mason remains in compliance with guidelines established in VITA, which is based on Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.
- Make available support and funding for enterprise-wide e-learning and information technology solutions that make it easier for faculty, staff, and academic departments to comply with disability legislation.

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