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Alternative Formats for Student Instructional Materials



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About the Minnesota Office of Higher Education

The Minnesota Office of Higher Education is a cabinet-level state agency providing students with financial aid programs and information to help them gain access to post-secondary education. The agency serves as the state's clearinghouse for data, research and analysis on post-secondary enrollment, financial aid, finance and trends.

The Minnesota State Grant Program, which is administered by the agency, is a need-based tuition assistance program for Minnesota students. The agency oversees tuition reciprocity programs, a student loan program, Minnesota's 529 College Savings Program, licensing and an early awareness outreach initiative for youth. Through collaboration with systems and institutions, the agency assists in the development of the state's education technology infrastructure and shared library resources.

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Task Force: Alternative Formats for Instructional Materials

The 2005 Minnesota Legislature directed the Minnesota Office of Higher Education to convene a group

“to develop a network to make available postsecondary instructional material in an electronic format or to identify other solutions, such as a national system, to address the specialized format needs of postsecondary students with disabilities.” (Laws of Minnesota, Chapter 107, Section 58)

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Minnesota Human Rights Law all basically require that students with documented disabilities have timely access to those materials in appropriate alternative formats deemed to be reasonable accommodations. To meet this set of obligations, Minnesota higher education institutions have offices of disability services. The Communication Center of State Services for the Blind serves much like a public library for people with print disabilities and provides them materials in a number of alternative formats.

Currently, most requests for materials in an alternative format made to publishers are honored to some degree. The most basic requests (i.e., for materials in Word format) are filled most often. Requests for materials in a specialized or less frequently used alternative formats are more likely to be problematic; either the materials are not available in the requested format or are not supplied within a timeframe required by the student. The work of the task force focused on this remaining, unmet need.

Task Force Process and Activities

In October 2005, the Office of Higher Education convened the first meeting of the task force with the following members:

David Andrews, State Services for the Blind
Scott Bay, Anoka Ramsey Community College
Jennifer Dunnam, University of Minnesota
Steve Frantz, Minnesota State Colleges and Universities
Sara Laviolette, Hennepin Technical College
Mike Sorbel, Minneapolis Community and Technical College
Richard Strong, State Services for the Blind

Although invited, neither the Private College Council nor four publishers' representatives attended the meetings. The Association of American Publishers responded at a later date. Emily Kissane, from the Office of Higher Education, staffed the project.

The task force reviewed the legislation and agreed to make recommendations to best serve the needs of students. Over the course of the subsequent five months, the task force researched best practices and reviewed how other states address students' needs, including a review of relevant legislation. The State Services for the Blind facilitated conference calls with representatives from the Kentucky Assistive Technology Service Network Coordinating Center. Statutes from other states addressing this issue vary somewhat in how they define which instructional materials are covered in statute, as well as the standards they have adopted for acceptable formats and timeliness of service.

On March 22, 2006, the Association of American Publishers (AAP) launched a National Alternative Formats Initiative and hired a consultant to work with publishers, educators and students nationwide to identify issues and formulate workable solutions to the access issue. In early April, AAP representatives Ed McCoy and Rick Bowes met with the Minnesota task force via conference call to discuss the state's specific concerns and possible processes for establishing formatting standards.

On June 22, 2006, Mr. Bowes came to Minnesota, met with the advisory group and toured facilities at the State Services for the Blind and the document conversion center at the University of Minnesota's Office of Disability Services. During the group's discussion of current practices and issues with Mr. Bowes, he raised the possibility of a national clearinghouse where publishers can deposit a high quality scan or other appropriate version of a text that all participating institutions could use.

On August 1, 2006, task force members conducted a small focus group to learn about students' current experiences and how best to address their needs. The task force decided to expand the focus group to reflect the culture, age and gender diversity of students served as well as the wide variety of accommodations campuses are required to make. Through mid-September, task force members held informal conversations with students, and the Office of Higher Education had the focus group questions available as a Web survey for students wishing to respond in that way. Although the number of respondents was very small, these students gave insights and confirmed the previous observations and experiences of task force members that some students still face considerable obstacles in having their needs met.

From October through December of 2006, the task force met several times to discuss findings, formulate recommendations and review drafts of this report. In November 2006, the University of Minnesota, the Association on Higher Education and Disability and the State Services for the Blind hosted a meeting on best practices in creating electronic text and working with publishers of academic materials. Disability services personnel from campuses throughout the state attended.

Findings and Recommendations

The 2005 legislation directed the task force to explore the idea of a network or national system to coordinate students' requests for alternative formats. The task force researched and discussed this option and concluded that advances in technology are changing the publishing landscape, and the development of national networking in the next few years is inevitable. Such a network will arise from market forces reshaping the publishing industry nationally and internationally. State level policy will be most effective if it focuses on assisting institutions during the transition.

In general, most campuses have in place a mechanism for handling instructor- or institution-produced handouts. The task force recommends that instructional materials be defined as commercially-produced materials that are required for a given course or are essential for a student's successful completion of that course.

Publishers should make materials available in alternative formats at the same time that the paper textbooks are issued. Such is not now the case and is unlikely to be achieved in the near term. Colleges and universities, therefore, will continue to play a very significant role in ensuring access to by eligible students to materials in accessible formats.

The task force identified three currently acceptable core formats: PDF, Word and XML with images. These distinct formats serve different purposes, and each lends itself to production of accessible products for students. In many instances, these formats can be used directly by students. In other instances, they can be used to more easily create the required end-user format (e.g., Braille, large print or audio).

In order for a college or university to provide the reasonable accommodation to the student with a disability, the institution needs to receive the material in the requested format in a timely manner. A student who has been approved to receive instructional materials in an alternative format should receive those items from the publisher in a usable format within two weeks of the request.

The task force identified the need for a centralized service in Minnesota that can receive and convert files provided by publishers into the particular format required by a student and requested by the college at no cost.

The task force recommends continued and increased funding for the State Services for the Blind to establish such a centralized conversion service within this state office. This value added service would prevent post-secondary institutions from unnecessarily establishing and maintaining excess capacity to address unique student needs. A centralized service can focus on the relatively standard format needs of most students. The State Services for the Blind is well-poised to address this issue.

The task force suggests that the implementation of these recommendations would best serve the needs of Minnesota's students.

Task Force Charge

H.F. No. 1385, Conference Committee Report - 84th Legislative Session (2005-2006)

44.14 Sec. 58. [ALTERNATIVE FORMAT INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIAL
44.15 NETWORK.]
44.16 The Higher Education Services Office must convene a group
44.17 with representatives from publishers of postsecondary
44.18 instructional materials, the Association of American Publishers
44.19 (AAP), the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities, the
44.20 University of Minnesota, all sectors of private postsecondary
44.21 education, and Minnesota State Services for the Blind to develop
44.22 a network to make available postsecondary instructional material
44.23 in an electronic format or to identify other solutions, such as
44.24 a national system, to address the specialized format needs of
44.25 postsecondary students with disabilities. The material
44.26 available through the network must be made available to
44.27 Minnesota postsecondary institutions and to postsecondary
44.28 students with disabilities that require a reading
44.29 accommodation. The group must establish standards for the
44.30 instructional material that is available through the network.
44.31 Instructional material must be in a format that is compatible
44.32 with assistive technology used by students who require a reading
44.33 accommodation. Instructional material includes, but is not
44.34 limited to, commercially printed materials published or produced
44.35 primarily for use by students in postsecondary educational
44.36 courses. Instructional materials also include materials
45.1 produced by postsecondary institutions, as defined by the group,
45.2 for use in conjunction with a course of study. The Higher
45.3 Education Services Office must report to the committees in the
45.4 house of representatives and senate with responsibility for
45.5 higher education finance by January 15, 2006, on progress in
45.6 developing the network and with recommendations on methods to
45.7 meet the needs of students for instructional materials in
45.8 alternative formats.