AN AUDIT OF THE ACCESSIBILITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION WEBSITES

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This research investigated the accessibility of higher education World Wide Web sites for college students with visual disabilities. Background research examined relevant legislation, web accessibility standards and recommendations, and relevant software tools for the visually impaired.

The six public universities in Washington State were selected for an accessibility audit. The sites were audited using three methods. The first method involved two software packages: Bobby Worldwide and AccVerify. Both of these software tools were configured to validate based on U.S. Section 508 requirements. The second method was listening to a talking browser read aloud each university's home page. The last method was a visual inspection of the HTML code to identify problems the automated tools either could not identify or falsely identified.

It was determined that both Bobby and AccVerify results were reasonably consistent with each other. All six universities failed on one or more of the following guidelines. These failures consisted of a lack of: text equivalents for every non-text element, pages that were readable without an associated style sheet, text equivalent pages when creating an accessible page is not possible, links to a plug-in or applet if the page cannot be interpreted by the client's system due to lack of application, user's choice to skip repetitive navigation buttons, and scripting languages that can be deciphered by assistive technology.

In addition, a survey was also emailed to the Washington Association on Postsecondary Education and Disability (WAPED) members located at several different colleges in Washington State. The survey was used in an attempt to find out information relating to specific schools. While not all schools replied to this survey, the responses that were acquired were helpful in making the final analysis. All schools that responded had at least one identified student with visual disabilities and stated that while they had some form of adaptive technology to suit visual disability needs, there currently were no official policies in place.

Examination of these responses along with the software results have yielded suggestions on how to improve higher education web sites to make them more accessible to students with visual disabilities. Most of the failures that resulted can be fixed quite easily. Accessibility research such as this paired with technological advances will aid in setting a new standard for effective *accessible* web design.