Dear Indiana Congressional Delegation:

Every day, blind students and other students with print disabilities are fighting to gain equal access to their course materials as their peers. These struggles could be prevented and impediments removed if institutions for higher education were provided with guidelines and direction in regard to accessibility. As a blind student attending Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana, I am writing to urge Congress to support the creation of voluntary guidelines for accessibility by a purpose-based commission. While Ball State University strives to provide exemplary services to students with disabilities and has assisted me in gaining the accommodations to be successful in graduate school, I still face delays in receiving accessible textbooks, inability to use certain websites and databases, and other accessibility challenges.

I am a first-year Master’s student working on a dual degree program in Clinical Mental Health Counseling and Social Psychology. Ultimately, my goal is to become a Licensed Mental Health Counselor. During my undergraduate career, and already in my graduate career, I have faced accessibility challenges that have caused discouragement and frustration, which is why this issue is so personal to me.

Last semester, as I was attempting to locate research articles to complete a research paper for my Introduction to Clinical Mental Health Counseling class, I encountered significant barriers in accessing journal articles, as they were either poorly tagged, meaning that my text-to-speech software could not decipher the text, or they were scanned images of printed documents, meaning I would have to hire a human reader or hope that an alternative scanning program might be able to recognize the text without too many errors. The outcome was that I had to take an incomplete in the class because of the burden of having to locate and hire a reader through the Office of Disability Services and then spend extra time trying to make materials accessible. Had the databases and articles been readily accessible from the start, I would not have had to deal with the added stress of completing a research paper over my winter break because I could have finished the paper by the end of the semester.

Allow me to share one other experience that is somewhat different. Prior to the start of my first semester, I had to complete an online course called Think About It, a mandatory course for all new incoming students at Ball State aimed at educating about and preventing alcohol misuse and sexual assault. About halfway in to the program, I could tell that I was encountering some accessibility issues. Some of the on-screen buttons that I clicked on were not opening as they should, and when I attempted to select items and move to the next screen using my keyboard commands with the use of my screen-reading program, the online program was not responding as it should. I kept trying, and I contacted the Technology Helpdesk, but the outcome was still that I missed the deadline and did not receive this invaluable information in the same timely manner as the rest of my peers.

Of course, there have been numerous other challenges that I have faced as a blind student, and my experience is not unique. Blind students face similar situations on a daily basis, which is why it is time to push for equal access in higher education. We are not looking for new standards; we are simply asking that assistance be given so that schools can fulfill the obligation that already exists to provide equal access to education for all students regardless of disability.

Sincerely,

Sarah K. Meyer