Personal Testimony

State: Massachusetts

Institution: Harvard University

Name: Sean Whalen

Dear Massachusetts Congressional Delegation:

When I learned that all of the required readings for the courses in my Master of Public Policy program were going to be posted online in electronic format, I, as a blind student who cannot read print, was thrilled. I assumed that my experience as a graduate student at Harvard would be much smoother in terms of accessibility than was my time as an undergrad seven years ago at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Unfortunately, my assumption proved premature. Despite the ease with which materials can be made accessible with current technology, I have found many of my electronic readings to be poorly tagged .pdf files that a text to speech screen-reading program cannot decipher. Instead of having access equal to that of my peers to course readings, the disability student services office has to convert the documents into text files and I have to wait to have access to the materials. This system is inefficient and it leaves me at a disadvantage to my classmates. This is one of many examples of access barriers I have encountered due to inaccessible technology. And stories like mine are all too common among blind college and graduate students. But why are blind students not receiving equal access to all aspects of education? It isn’t because accessibility is difficult or expensive to achieve. And it isn’t because universities are maliciously discriminating against blind students. It is simply because schools, for the most part, don’t really understand what accessibility looks like. And, therefore, the schools do not know what accessibility features to demand from those who create the technologies they purchase and use. Voluntary guidelines would address this problem. Written standards would set out clear metrics for accessibility in course management software, electronic reading materials, and e-readers or tablets used by students. These guidelines would not impose any new legal requirements on schools, but rather would assist schools in meeting their obligation to provide full and equal access to all students, regardless of disability. I urge you to support equal access to education in order to ensure that blind students like me don’t face needless barriers in our education.

Sincerely,

Sean Whalen

President | National Association of Blind Students