Dear Iowa Congressional Delegation:

I am writing to share my personal story in the higher education system and to share why the Accessible Instructional Materials in Higher Education Act will benefit myself, as well as future students who are blind. I graduated From Grand View University with my Bachelors in 2011 and am now returning for my Masters in Business Administration from Drake University. I did not realize that in the 5 years between degrees, technology has changed immensely. From chalk boards to smart boards, and from handing in documents to submitting things online using Blackboard, I thought technology would make it easier for me to learn.

I’m sure everyone has had that one experience with a piece of technology where, upon further investigation; ends up not living up to expectations. I remember when I was in undergrad in 2008, the Kindle first came out and I was so excited about getting all my textbooks on it and being able to use a screen reader to work independently. it was my dream come true, but upon further investigation, I found there were still very few textbooks that were being made electronically, yet alone accessibly. While now, there are many more books in electronic format, making the accessible is still an arduous process.

Fast forward 9 years and I thought surely these books would be available to me now its 2017 what isn’t available in Ibooks or Kindle these days? I was overjoyed when I downloaded my very first electronic textbook but then… I was so close. To my dismay, the e textbooks used by the kindle textbook platform is not readable by Voiceover (Apple’s built in screen reading software) even though the text is right there on the screen, screen reading software did not detect it as text. These issues have been slowing down the education of so many blind students. Many schools and companies simply do not know something is inaccessible until it is too late and has negatively affected a student’s education. These issues may also lead to lawsuits against schools. This problem could be easily solved if guidelines were set in place to educate the various parties involved with developing online curriculum and textbooks.

In a world where Apple has built in software in every iPhone to accommodate visually impaired consumers, there is no reason that other companies should not be able to do the same, especially higher education institutions. Students, parents, scholarship funds state agencies and federal programs all spend hundreds of thousands of dollars sending blind students to college so that we may have a fair shot in the workforce. Many of these dollars are wasted because students are dropping out of school or retaking classes due to inaccessibility. Many of these students do not return to school and remain at home without a competitive education or a pathway to employment. This means less people in the workforce less tax revenue and less contributing members of society.

Although the Americans with Disabilities Act helps require some accommodations, the advent of computers has really complicated this matter. Also there is a difference between being accessible and being feasible and realistic. For example most cities require a sidewalk be placed on at least one side of the street for pedestrian accessibility, but walk a mile around West Des Moines or other spread out suburbs and you may quickly find out what it is like for a blind student to navigate through seemingly “accessible” material. Streets are spread out, there is always construction, and cars aren’t used to pedestrians in these areas so they aren’t typically watching. It takes twice as long and is twice as difficult.

 The AIM HEA Act does not cost anything to implement and would help support students to become contributing members of society. It would also protect schools from litigation associated with inaccessible technology. Please consider cosponsoring AIM HEA

Sincerely

Janae B. Burgmeier