

The Americans with Disabilities Act and University Communication Centers

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The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed into law on July 26, 1990. According to the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice, “The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) gives civil rights protections to individuals with disabilities that are like those provided to individuals on the basis of race, sex, national origin, and religion. It guarantees equal opportunity for individuals with disabilities in employment, public accommodations, transportation, state and local government services, and telecommunications” (United States Department of Education, 2019). The ADA is relevant to many aspects of American society, but one of its most essential functions is ensuring equal access and opportunity for students with disabilities pursuing college degrees. This aspect includes regulating the support services universities offer their students.

University communication centers are intended to help all students succeed, so compliance with the ADA is crucial. To check for compliance, communication center directors need to make sure the physical space, technology, and required training for employees are sufficient to meet the varying needs of students with disabilities. Because communication centers are smaller sites within a larger university, many of these compliance activities are the result of creative and/or experimental innovations to the space and services offered. This paper will demonstrate these moments of ingenuity in action and make suggestions for improvements to provide

inspiration and advice to other communication centers.

Title III of the ADA “... prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in the activities of places of public accommodations and requires newly constructed or altered places of public accommodation ... to comply with the ADA Standards” (ADA, 2019). University communication centers are considered spaces of public accommodation, and therefore, to serve students with disabilities effectively, need to regularly check their compliance with the ADA. Communication centers squeezed into small spaces or located in a building without a ramp or on a floor other than ground level can make access difficult for people with mobile disabilities. One center director from a public university told me that their communication center is in a tight space, so even a small change in the layout can put the center out of compliance. This director went on to say, “... a bigger, wider space would be a plus” (February, 2020). This director also mentioned a time when the elevator in the communication center’s building broke down and alternate arrangements had to be made to accommodate students with mobile disabilities. A center director from a private university told me that their center is in a non-ADA compliant building, but said, “We moved to this new building from one that was much less compliant, and it has helped out a lot with our students being able to get to us physically” (June, 2020).

Because of the unprecedented situation created by the COVID-19 pandemic, university communication centers

received a pop quiz on the effectiveness of their technology and their ability to function completely online. This situation was unexpected, and some communication centers were not prepared to offer equal access with their online presence. A center director from a private university told me that they moved to using Google Meet to video conference with speakers. However, this created an issue because appointments could only be made online. She went on to say that, "In the future, we are moving to Zoom room sessions that are set up by our desk managers who will also serve as a point of contact for scheduling and any problems faced" (June, 2020). As the need for online consultation services increases with many universities moving to online learning for the fall 2020 semester, checking that online services are accessible for students with disabilities is essential. However, it is important to point out that the ADA has not been sufficiently updated to reflect the differing needs created by online services and does not offer clear guidelines for communication centers attempting to operate during quarantine.

Whether the ADA specifically calls for an accommodation or not, the goal of the ADA remains the same: equal access and opportunity. Communication center directors need to keep this responsibility in mind when checking for compliance and when planning ways to improve how their centers serve students with disabilities. One center director from a private university told me that, "We currently trust that our speakers and tutors will communicate and negotiate the session amongst themselves to help each other out the most, but more training would help facilitate this conversation and make it easier on both parties" (June, 2020). Training communication center employees in the best practices for serving students with

disabilities is not required by the ADA, but would serve the spirit of the law. For example, there could be training in how specifically to handle a consultation with a student who is blind or deaf. This center director also said, "I would like to see more training for my tutors (and all tutors) about working with an interpreter and a student who is deaf or hard of hearing in a speech presentation format" (June, 2020). This will only happen if a course in disability training is mandated for all communication center employees before they begin work.

As places of public accommodation and, more importantly, places dedicated to ensuring students' success, communication centers must not only comply with the letter of the law in meeting the mandates of the ADA, but also comply with its spirit. It is prudent to check a center's physical space and technology often and to advocate within the university system for the necessity of having these items meet the needs of all students. It is also important to take the ideal of student success seriously by training employees to accommodate students with disabilities and effectively help them succeed in their academic pursuits. As a student with disabilities, I am pleased to work in a communication center that encourages advocacy for students with disabilities. I hope all communication centers continue to make progress in helping the students they serve achieve success.

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