Ravi Hudson

The Importance of Improving Accessibility on College Campuses

Over the past decade, the number of students with disabilities that are enrolled at post-secondary institutions such as Kennesaw State University has been steadily increasing (U.S Department of Education). Along with the increasing number of students with disabilities at KSU, is increased use of the internet on campus. While this use of the internet is made to make things easier for all students and staff, for the population on the KSU campus with disabilities, it makes things much more difficult. This is because of the low level of web accessibility. Web accessibility means that a website can be easily used by everyone, specifically persons with disabilities. Most websites used at KSU are lacking in accessibility. This is a major problem because most tasks such as scheduling appointments, keeping up with campus events, and communicating with professors are done online.

For a website to be considered accessible, it must have certain features that allow the content to be read and navigated in the simplest way possible. By using Wave, an online tool made to test the accessibility of a webpage, it has been found that most KSU websites do not have these features. One of the main features missing from KSU's websites is keyboard accessibility. Keyboard accessibility makes it possible for people who are unable to use a mouse, such as people with physical handicaps or visual impairments, to navigate a website using only a keyboard or other assistive devices (Henry and McGee). One of KSU's most used website's, Owl Express, is severely lacking in this feature. In the section of the website where students register for classes, most of the functions require a mouse. This is a major issue for students because they are unable to register for classes on their own. They have to depend on others for help, and since most of the information in Owl Express is confidential, students with disabilities don't get the same privacy rights as other students.

At KSU, D2L is a website where professors post assignments and where students complete their assignments. According to Wave and from personal experience as a visually impaired student a KSU, the formatting of D2L makes submitting and accessing assignments difficult. Certain links and elements are not labeled in ways in which they can be read by screen readers or enhanced for low vision students. D2L also doesn't function on all browsers, which is a problem since all students use different devices with different browsers to access the internet. This not only puts pressure on the students, it also puts pressure on the professors. When students come to professors with a problem submitting or completing assignments due to website difficulties, professors often don't know how to fix it. Therefore, they either have to come up with an alternative assignment or get in contact with the university's IT department.

Taking into consideration these accessibility flaws and how they affect the students and staff at KSU, you may be asking how these issues can be resolved. The main solution is to improve the accessibility of these websites. One way this can be done is by hiring or training a web developing team to reformat and redesign websites such as Owl Express and D2L and add accessibility features. Examples of some features that can be added are alternative text to describe images, formatting the website to function on all browsers, and making sure that any audio or text on the webpage can be seen and heard by everyone (Kearney, Gash, Boxhall, and Dodson). Along with a team of web developers, a team of students and staff with varying disabilities should be asked to test these websites as they are being improved. That way, it can be known what works and what doesn't.

All of this may seem like it costs a lot of money and making the websites perfect may seem impossible, but in the long run, accessible websites can have many benefits and it is easier than it seems. Ways on how to make a website accessible can be easily found online and web developers don't have to hire a special tech person to do the job. With the training they already have or with a few extra classes, the team of people who keep up KSU's websites already can easily make these improvements. As far as making the websites perfect and making sure they work for everyone, we all know that may never happen, but improving these websites and making them accessible to as many people as possible is all that matters.

The population of students with disabilities at KSU is growing, but the accessibility is not. The internet is supposed to make things easier, but for students with disabilities, due to the lack of accessibility, it makes things much harder. By improving the accessibility of campus websites, we improve the college experience for all students. By solving this problem, we encourage more students to enroll in post-secondary education because they feel that they receive equal education opportunities in all areas.

Works Cited

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