

SU Senate Computing Services Committee
Report and Recommendations on Digital Media Accessibility at Syracuse University
April 13, 2014

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Under the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) and Sections 504 and 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, postsecondary institutions in the U.S. are required to ensure the members of their campus community with disabilities are not discriminated against on the basis of their disability.

These laws consider a disability to be "a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of the individual," "a record of such impairment" or "being regarded as having such an impairment" (Americans with Disabilities Act, U.S. Code 1994). The following are considered valid disabilities under the law, and reasonable accommodation may be appropriate for individuals with:

- Illnesses involving medications that cause permanent or temporary disabilities such as chronic fatigue, memory and speech impairments, severe physical discomfort and other effects;
- mobility impairments that limit coordination, reach, or difficulty in manipulating materials (paper, pen, keyboard);
- Sensory impairments, including visual and hearing impairments;
- learning disabilities, including a diverse group of academic and perceptual disorders, i.e., dyslexia, autism, minimal brain dysfunction and aphasia; and
- Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD)

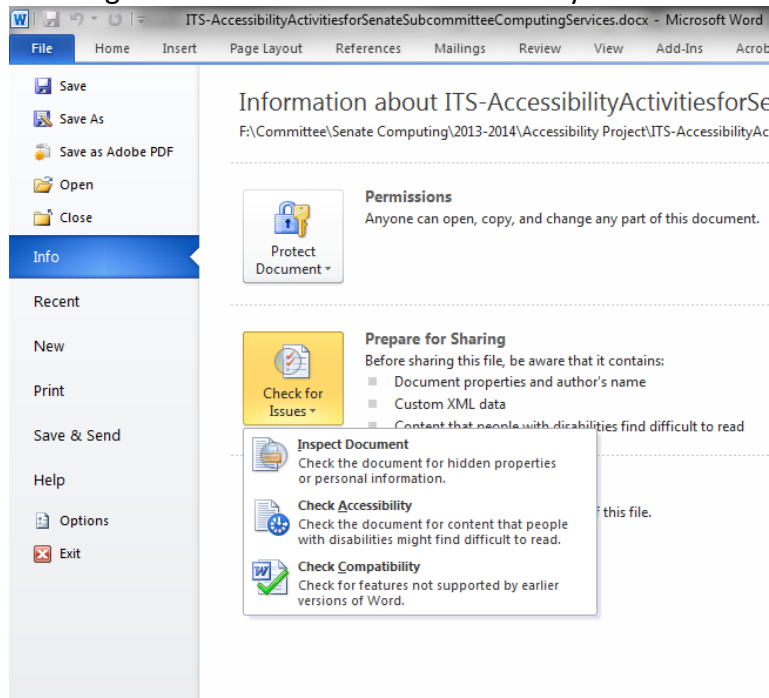
The legal responsibility to accommodate disabled members of the university community is compelling on its own. In addition, these disabilities affect a sizable segment of our university community. For example, students with disabilities represent nearly 11 percent of all postsecondary students (GOA, 2009), a number that has almost tripled in the past twenty years (Steele & Wolanin, 2004). Furthermore, the US Census (2012) finds that 6.4% of all employed persons in the US are classified as disabled, so many of SU's administrators, staff, and faculty also possess these disabilities. Because many aspects of work and life at the university (academic services, academic work, and professional responsibilities) involve some interaction with digital media, accessibility issues affect many members of our academic community, and incidentally because it's the law, the Senate Computing Services Committee undertook a review of the accessibility of SU's digital media and the assistive technologies that allow disabled users to interact with that content.

Overview of our Findings

During the last year we have learned that assistive technology (AT) is a broad term applicable to products or technology-based services that help people with disabilities learn, work and enjoy life. In the context of our study, assistive information technologies are devices and applications that enable disabled people to use computers more productively. The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.0) defines accessible digital information technologies as those which can be operated in a variety of ways and “...do not rely on a single sense or ability of the user,” (W3C, 2014). Examples of accessible digital media include captioned videos for students who are Deaf and online materials that can work with assistive technologies like screen readers used by blind people to acquire information displayed on a computer screen.

The committee also learned that SU’s Information Technology and Services (ITS) unit has adopted a policy to achieve compliance with World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) Version 2.0, Level AA standards. Partly as a result, many of us routinely use applications that allow us to create and distribute accessible digital media. These include applications such as the current versions Microsoft Office (see Figure 1, which incidentally does not meet accessibility guidelines); Adobe Acrobat, which can create or convert documents to formats that can be interpreted, to some extent, by screen readers; and even Blackboard Learn (Rel 9.1, SP 10), which conforms to the WCAG 2.0 standards for log-ins and use of the platform.

Figure 1: Microsoft Word Accessibility Checker



However, some members of the campus community may not be aware of the existence and/or the capabilities of these applications. To increase awareness and instruct users in

the use of technologies that can evaluate and create accessible digital documents for teaching, learning and research, ITS and New Horizons Computer Learning Centers of Syracuse have developed a workshop entitled "Accessibility Fundamentals for Microsoft Office 2013 and Adobe Acrobat XI." First offered Dec 13, 2013, five of the 3-hour hands-on, face-to-face training workshops have been staged at SU so far, involving 188 individuals from 23 different administrative and academic units of the University.

Beyond this, ITS:

1. Ensures that technology products and services purchased by ITS comply with Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) Version 2.0
2. Coordinates real-time captioning (Communication Access Real-time Translation), provides assisted listening devices, and coordinates Sign Language Interpretation to make events and classes accessible and inclusive.
3. Consults and supports closed captioning services for digitized media, including services from Automatic Sync that enable automatic creation of closed captioning (CC) files for digitized videos.
4. Partners with other campus groups, notably the Office of Faculty Development, the Office of Disability Services, and the Disability Cultural Center, to bring to campus virtual conferences and webinars dealing with accessibility and technology. The most recent such event was the virtual version of "Accessing Higher Ground," a live, web-based conference focused on Accessible Media, Web and Technology, presented by the Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) on November 4 – 8, 2013.
5. Maintains a "Technology and Accessibility" (<http://its.syr.edu/accessible-tech/index.html>) page that serves as a clearinghouse for resources and tools that help members of the SU community ensure their work products are accessible.

What remains to be done

In the year we have been investigating this issue, we've observed significant progress towards the goal of improving campus-wide accessibility of digital media. However, we've also discovered significant accessibility issues that the committee believes need to be addressed in the near future. The more prominent among these include the following:

- 1) Awareness of digital media accessibility is not at a uniformly high level across campus.
- 2) Some academic and administrative units do not appear to have policies governing the purchase of accessible digital media.
- 3) The University lacks a central contact point of contact for faculty and staff seeking guidance and/or assistance with accessible technology and media issues.

A university is by nature a diverse collection of semi-autonomous units. In some cases, however, these units must coordinate their efforts to achieve certain objectives. We believe that for the case of accessible digital media, efforts to ensure the University fully complies with ADA and the Rehabilitation Act are best led by the administration. Therefore,

the SU Senate Computing Services Committee seeks the University Senate's endorsement of its recommendation to encourage the Administration to:

Proceed with the selection and appointment of the previously authorized ADA coordinator, whose duties will include:

- a. overseeing campus-wide compliance with the ADA and the Rehabilitation Act;
- b. developing university-wide policy addressing procurement of accessible digital media and web content; and
- c. developing university policy for the accessibility of web-based digital content, such as the standards for Web Content Accessibility as outlined in WCAG 2.0.

References:

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