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Disability Online: The Digital Lives and Navigation Strategies of Young Adults with Disabilities

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Issue Brief: Disability in Higher Education

Disability Online:

The Digital Lives and Navigation Strategies of Young Adults with Disabilities

Even controlling for key predictors of college choice like academic achievement and socioeconomic status, students with disabilities seem to make different decisions about where to apply and where to enroll than their peers without disabilities (Kimball, Wells, Ostiguy, Manly, & Lauterbach, 2016). In an effort to understand why, we explored available web-based information about college-going for students with disabilities in Massachusetts. Our findings suggest that there is limited good information about how students with disabilities should approach college admissions and enrollment (called college-going when examined together) or which colleges and universities would be well-positioned to support them. That is particularly true for students with some disability types—for example: mental health conditions, visual impairments, and traumatic brain injuries.

To reach these conclusions, we examined Google search results for both plain and technical language searches including one of twenty-five keywords related to disability; either college or university; and either “MA” or Massachusetts. We then categorized these results based on the author and whether the result had information about college-going, and looked at variations in results across search terms. We then developed short vignettes that described how high school students with varying types of disabilities as well as their parents or guidance counselors might use the most frequently occurring pages.

College Going Information

Examining the roughly 1200 distinct datapoints generated by our searches, we found that there was an overwhelming signal and noise problem. In fact, about 62% of the search results did not provide any information whatsoever about college or college-going. Figure 1 shows the results of our analysis.

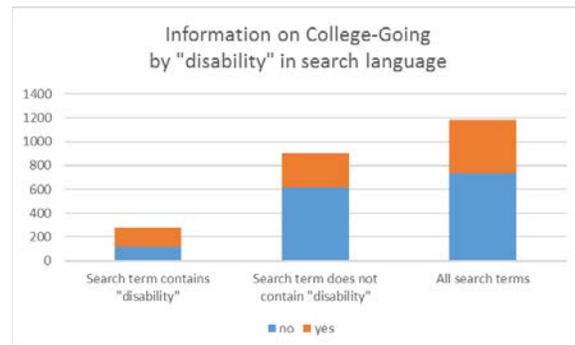


Figure 1: Relevance of Search Results

Notably, including the term “disability” in the search (e.g., physical disability, learning disability) did improve the frequency with which results were about college-going but also often returned results about all types of disabilities rather than those specified.

Authors of Webpages

We also examined who produced the webpages that we found using our Google searches. Figure 2 shows the results of our analysis.

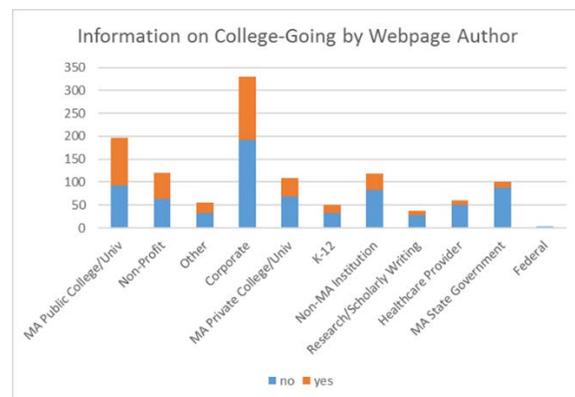


Figure 2: Authorship of Search Results

Corporate authors produced the largest percentage of these results (about 28%) and did so at a rate more than 1.5 times the next highest producer (MA Public Colleges and Universities at 17%). This is problematic for two reasons: 1) a lot of the information that

corporate websites provided was irrelevant (58%); and 2) most corporate sites did not provide neutral college-going advice but instead sought to steer students with disabilities toward online, for-profit institutions. Digging a bit deeper into these figures, it also becomes clear that the problem of irrelevant information is widespread, with only Massachusetts Public Colleges and Universities providing useful results more often than results without information on college-going.

Variation across Search Terms

We also looked at whether the availability of good information about college-going varied across disability type. It did. Only six disability types had useful information more often than not: ADHD (78%),

Intellectual Disability (74%), Learning Disability (73%) Physical Disability (66%), Deaf (51%), and Dyslexia (50%). Of the unhelpful search results, the limited information available to blind (38%) or visually impaired (10%) students as well as the total lack of information available for students with communication disorders (0%) stand out immediately. However, most concerning to us is the deficient amount of information available about mental health (27%) depression (28%), and anxiety (24%). The reason that this concern is particularly acute here is that students with mental health conditions are the largest group of students with disabilities, the fastest growing group of students of disabilities, and a group that colleges and universities report feeling ill-equipped to support. Not providing good information to these students in the college search process does not keep them from enrolling, but it may keep them from accessing services they might need to be successful.

Student Vignette

To understand how students with disabilities might encounter college-going information online, we also constructed vignettes that explained our search data.

The following describes the hypothetical search experiences of Tabitha, a blind high school student: *Using a speech-to-text search engine, she spoke the only three things she thought she knew about her college search: “blind,” Massachusetts,” and “university.” She used her keyboard to scroll through the results with her screen reader. First, ads. One for high-quality window blinds. Nope. Next. Two for online institutions. Nope. Next. Finally, the main search results. Two listings of colleges with need-blind admissions. A bit ableist? And totally unhelpful. Next. A link to the Perkins School for Blind. Not helpful, but getting closer. Next. A website from College Choice.Net promising to provide information about the “50 Best Disability Friendly Colleges and Universities.” Promising, Tabitha thought, as she clicked the link.*

As we go on to discuss, not only was that search result not helpful to Tabitha since it contained little information about students with visual impairments, but it also was poorly formatted for accessibility. We found this sort of pattern frequently in our data.

Summary

Web-based information about college-going does not often address disability in thoughtful ways. It may be missing, biased, or inaccessible, but the net effect is a message of non-inclusion. High schools should help students with disabilities learn the information literacy practices needed to find useful information. Colleges and universities should create more useful, accessible content.

References

Kimball, E., Wells, R. S., Ostiguy, B., Manly, C., & Lauterbach, A. (2016). Students with disabilities in higher education: A review of the literature and an agenda for future research. In M. Paulsen (Ed.), *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research: Volume 31* (pp. 91-156). New York: Springer.

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