Equity and Access Issues in Virtual Education in the United States

Online education is one of the fastest growing movements in K-12 education today. Over half the states currently have some form of state-run virtual school and additional states are preparing to create their own programs. (Rose and Blomeyer 2007) Various studies have indicated that at least one-third of the US high school population have had some form of online education experience. (Selzer and Lewis, 2005, Allen and Seaman 2006)

Teacher preparation programs are beginning to include information about virtual schooling into their teacher preparation programs and there are a number of graduate students researching issues in virtual education for dissertations. There are a variety of different approaches to providing virtual education and there are significant program differences, (Rose and Blomeyer 2007) but little has been said, either in the field, or in teacher preparation programs, about the issues of access and equity in online classes and virtual schools.

The North American Council for Online Learning released a seit of National Standard of Quality for Online Courses (http://www.nacol.org/nationalstandards/NACOL%20Standards%20Quality%20Online%20Courses%202007.pdf) that include access as a standard, but there's little to explain the detail behind the standards that say all online courses should be accessible and comply with Section 508.

The Research Committee of the North American Council for Online Learning felt that the topic was of sufficient import that it was the focus for one of their first Issues Briefs. (http://www.nacol.org/docs/NACOL_EquityAccess.pdf)

The panelists all had a part in the creation of the *Issue Brief: Access and Equity in Online Classes and Virtual Schools*. The panelists will address this topic from their individual perspectives, but will also focus on the issues raised in the Issues Brief. Though the focus of the Issues Brief was on for the K-12 community, the issues of access and equity are also germane to online course development in higher education. The topics will include the legal responsibilities of online education programs as related to access issues and research findings on equity issues in online environments.

Participants will participate actively in the discussion and should be able, at the conclusion of the session, to identify the basic equity and access issues including legal issues that all online education programs should address. Participants will receive a list of resources including open source applications that can help address access issues in online course development. The Issues Brief will be included in the SITE Conference proceedings.

Panelists:

Raymond Rose
President Rose & Smith Associates

Austin, Texas

Robert Blomeyer
Blomeyer & Clemente Consulting Services
Lisle, IL 60532

Cathy Cavanaugh
University of Florida
Gainesville, FL 32611

Zahrl Schoeney
Curry School, University of Virginia
Charlottesville, VA

References

Allen, I, E., & Seaman, J. (2006) Making the Grade Online Education in the United
    States, Sloan C.

Rose, R. M., and Blomeyer, R. L. (2007) Research Committee Issues Brief: Access and
    Equity in Online Classes and Virtual Schools, North American Council for Online
    Learning,

Setzer, J. C., and Lewis, L. (2005). Distance Education Courses for Public Elementary
    and Secondary School Students: 2002–03 (NCES 2005–010). U.S. Department
    of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.