



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION  
OFFICE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS, REGION I  
5 POST OFFICE SQUARE, 8<sup>th</sup> FLOOR  
BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS 02109-3921

December 6, 2017

Christina Paxson  
President  
Brown University  
1 Prospect Street  
Box 1860  
Providence, RI 02912

By Email: [president@brown.edu](mailto:president@brown.edu)

Re: Complaint No. 01-17-2083  
Brown University

Dear President Paxson:

This letter is to advise you of the outcome of the complaint that the U.S. Department of Education (Department), Office for Civil Rights (OCR) received against Brown University (the University) alleging disability discrimination. The Complaint alleged that certain of the pages on the University's website are not accessible to persons with certain disabilities, including but not limited to vision impairments. These webpages include but are not limited to:

- Homepage at <http://www.brown.edu>;
- Facts about Financial Aid at <https://www.brown.edu/content/facts-about-financial-aid>;
- Financial Aid at <https://www.brown.edu/about/administration/financial-aid>;
- What is Work Study or Campus Employment at <https://www.brown.edu/about/administration/financial-aid/what-work-study-or-campus-employment>;
- Financial Aid A to Z at <http://www.brown.edu/about/administration/financial-aid/z>;
- A-Z Directory at <http://www.brown.edu/a-to-z/academics/depts>;
- Library at <http://library.brown.edu>;
- About Brown University at <http://www.brown.edu/about>;
- Student and Employee Accessibility Services at <http://www.brown.edu/campus-life/support/accessibility-services>;
- Admission at <https://www.brown.edu/admission>;
- Graduate School Application Information at <http://www.brown.edu/academics/gradschool/apply>; and
- Facebook at <http://www.facebook.com/brownuniversity/>.

OCR is responsible for enforcing Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504), as amended, 29 U.S.C. § 794, and its implementing regulation at 34 C.F.R. Part 104, which prohibit discrimination on the basis of disability in programs or activities receiving financial assistance

*The Department of Education's mission is to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness by fostering educational excellence and ensuring equal access.*

from the Department. The University is a recipient of financial assistance from the Department. Therefore, OCR had jurisdictional authority to investigate this complaint under Section 504.

As explained further below, before OCR completed its investigation, the University expressed a willingness to resolve the complaint by taking the steps set out in the enclosed Resolution Agreement. The following is a discussion of the relevant legal standards and information obtained by OCR during the investigation that informed the development of the Resolution Agreement.

### **Legal Standards**

Section 504 prohibit people, on the basis of disability, from being excluded from participation in, being denied the benefits of, or otherwise being subjected to discrimination by recipients of federal financial assistance or by public entities. 34 C.F.R. § 104.4. Individuals with disabilities must have equal access to recipients’ programs, services, and activities unless doing so would fundamentally alter the nature of the programs, services, or activities, or would impose an undue burden. Section 504 prohibits affording individuals with disabilities an opportunity to participate in or benefit from aids, benefits, and services that is unequal to the opportunity afforded others. 34 C.F.R. § 104.4(b)(1)(ii). Similarly, individuals with disabilities must be provided with aids, benefits, or services that provide an equal opportunity to achieve the same result or the same level of achievement as others. 34 C.F.R. § 104.4(b)(2). An individual with a disability, or a class of individuals with disabilities, may be provided with a different or separate aid, benefit, or service only if doing so is necessary to ensure that the aid, benefit, or service is as effective as that provided to others. 34 C.F.R. § 104.4(b)(1)(iv). In sum, programs, services, and activities—whether in a “brick and mortar,” on-line, or other “virtual” context—must be operated in ways that comply with Section 504.

### **Factual Background**

To date, OCR has investigated this complaint by reviewing the information the Complainant provided and conducting a preliminary assessment of the accessibility of several pages from the University’s website.

The complaint alleges that the University’s website is not in compliance with Section 504 because it is inaccessible to individuals with vision disabilities, print disabilities, physical impairments, and hearing impairments. The Complainant used website accessibility checkers (PowerMapper and WAVE) and reported to OCR that the University’s webpages listed above had accessibility issues for individuals with disabilities. The Complainant then provided OCR with a list of errors copied and pasted from the website accessibility checker that she used.

OCR conducted a preliminary examination of the University’s websites you referenced, and found possible compliance concerns as to whether the University’s website is accessible to individuals with disabilities. A brief review of the College’s website on November 8, 2017, indicated that the College’s sites described continued to lack various features, such as skip navigation, broken skip links, lacked visible keyboard controls, keyboard controls (such as tabbing and arrows) did not access all content, and there was text with low contrast.

**Conclusion**

Prior to the conclusion of OCR’s investigation and pursuant to Section 302 of OCR’s *Case Processing Manual*, the University expressed an interest in resolving this complaint. Subsequent discussions between OCR and the University resulted in the University signing the enclosed Agreement which, when fully implemented, will resolve the issues raised in this complaint. The terms of the Agreement are aligned with the complaint allegation and are consistent with the applicable laws and regulations. OCR will monitor the University’s implementation of the Agreement and continue to do so until it has determined that the University has complied with the terms of the Agreement. Failure to implement the Agreement could result in OCR reopening the complaint.

This concludes OCR’s investigation of the complaint. This letter should not be interpreted to address the University’s compliance with any other regulatory provision or to address any issues other than those addressed in this letter. This letter sets forth OCR’s determination in an individual OCR case. This letter is not a formal statement of OCR policy and should not be relied upon, cited, or construed as such. OCR’s formal policy statements are approved by a duly authorized OCR official and made available to the public. The Complainant may have the right to file a private suit in federal court whether or not OCR finds a violation.

Please be advised that the University must not harass, coerce, intimidate, discriminate, or otherwise retaliate against an individual because that individual asserts a right or privilege under a law enforced by OCR or files a complaint, testifies, assists, or participates in a proceeding under a law enforced by OCR. If this happens, the individual may file a retaliation complaint with OCR.

Under the Freedom of Information Act, it may be necessary to release this document and related correspondence and records upon request. If OCR receives such a request, we will seek to protect personally identifiable information that could reasonably be expected to constitute an unwarranted invasion of personal privacy if released, to the extent provided by law.

If you have any questions, you may contact Civil Rights Attorney James Moser at (617) 289-0146 or by e-mail at [james.moser@ed.gov](mailto:james.moser@ed.gov).

Sincerely,

Meena Morey Chandra *w/p AMM*  
Acting Regional Director

Enclosure

cc:     XXXXX X XXXXX XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX  
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