



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
OFFICE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS, REGION II

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August 9, 2017

Shirley Ann Jackson, Ph.D.
President
Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute
110 Eighth Street
Troy, New York 12180

Re: Case No. 02-17-2145
Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute

Dear Dr. Jackson:

This letter is to notify you of the determination made by the U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights (OCR), with respect to the above-referenced complaint filed against the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (the Institute). OCR investigated the complainant's allegation that the Institute is discriminating, on the basis of disability, because its website is not accessible to individuals with disabilities.

OCR is responsible for enforcing Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, 29 U.S.C. § 794 (Section 504), 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 from the U.S. Department of Education (the Department). The Institute is a recipient of financial assistance from the Department. Therefore, OCR has jurisdictional authority to investigate this complaint under Section 504.

This letter summarizes the applicable legal standards, the information gathered during the investigation, and how the complaint was resolved.

Legal Authority:

Section 504 prohibits 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, respectively. 34 C.F.R. § 104.4. Section 504 also 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.

Investigation:

During the course of the investigation, OCR examined the pages on the Institute’s website that the complainant identified to determine whether these are accessible to persons with disabilities. These webpages included:

- <http://www.rpi.edu>;¹
- <http://admissions.rpi.edu/aid/scholarships.html>;
- <http://admission.rpi.edu/aid/index.html>;
- <http://admissions.rpi.edu/aid/howtoapply.html>;
- <http://www.rpi.edu/academics/index.html>;
- <http://admissions.rpi.edu/undergraduate/life/libraries.html>;
- <http://admissions.rpi.edu/undergraduate/students/index.html>;
- <https://news.rpi.edu>;
- <http://studentlife.rpi.edu>; and
- <http://info.rpi.edu/advising-learning-assistance>.

OCR evaluated the above-listed pages and determined that: (i) keyboard controls did not access all content and functions, or were not visually apparent, which makes it difficult for keyboard users to navigate the pages; (ii) important images were missing text descriptions, referred to as “alt tags,” that describe the images to blind and low-vision users who use special software; and (iii) web pages had insufficient contrast, which affected all viewers, including those with visual disabilities and those with certain cognitive/neurological disabilities. OCR determined that the deficiencies identified constitute barriers that deny persons with disabilities access to programs, services, and activities offered on the website and may impede the Institute’s communications with persons with disabilities.

Resolution Agreement:

The Institute signed a resolution agreement (Agreement) on August 4, 2017. When fully implemented, the Agreement will address the findings of noncompliance noted above, as well as resolve issues of accessibility pertaining to the rest of the Institute’s website. The Institute committed to take actions including:

¹ OCR also examined the Institute’s Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/RPI.EDU>) and YouTube (<https://m.youtube.com/user/rpirensseiaer>) pages.

- selecting an auditor who has the requisite knowledge and experience to identify barriers to access on the Institute’s website and conducting a thorough audit of existing online content and functionality;
- making all new website content and functionality accessible to people with disabilities;
- developing a corrective action plan to prioritize the removal of online barriers over a 36-month period;
- posting a notice to persons with disabilities about how to request access to online information or functionality that is currently inaccessible; and
- providing website accessibility training to all appropriate personnel.

OCR will monitor the Institute’s implementation of the Agreement. When OCR concludes that the Institute has fully and effectively implemented the terms and obligations of the Agreement and is in compliance with the statutes and regulations at issue in the case, OCR will terminate its monitoring and close the case. If the Institute fails to implement the Agreement, OCR may initiate administrative or judicial proceedings to enforce specific terms and obligations of the Agreement. Before initiating administrative (34 CFR §§ 100.9, 100.10) or judicial proceedings to enforce the Agreement, OCR will give the Institute written notice of the alleged breach and sixty (60) calendar days to cure the breach.

These findings should not be interpreted to address the Institute’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 Institute may not harass, coerce, intimidate, or discriminate against any individual because he or she has filed a complaint or participated in the complaint resolution process. If this happens, the individual may file a complaint alleging such treatment.

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

If you have any questions, please contact R. Colin Power, Compliance Team Attorney, at (646) 428-3832 or R.Colin.Power@ed.gov; Janet Pfeffer, Senior Compliance Team Investigator at (646) 428-3831 or Janet.Pfeffer@ed.gov; or Anna Moretto Cramer, Compliance Team Leader, at (646) 428-3826 or Anna.Moretto.Cramer@ed.gov.

Sincerely,

/s/

Timothy C. J. Blanchard

Encl.

cc: xxxxxxxx, Esq.