

The Four Access Environments

“Keeping Our Eyes on the Prize:
Leadership and Management of Disability Services”
AHEAD Conference, July 13, 2004

Physical Environment

Elements of this environment are most often thought of when discussing disability-related access. Curb cuts, ramps and elevators are some of the more visible additions to physical environments since the implementation of accessibility laws. Additionally, raised print and braille signage in elevators and outside offices, along with visual alarms, are adaptations to the physical environment which make it more accessible to people with sensory disabilities (e.g. blind/visually impaired and deaf/hard of hearing).



Informational Environment

This environment encompasses print materials (e.g. posters, flyers, agendas, campus newspapers), oral communications (e.g. speakers, films and performances), and information technologies (e.g. telephones, interactive kiosks, Internet pages). Access to the informational environment can occur through the creation of printed materials in alternate formats (braille, large print, audio tape, and digital format), the provision of sign language interpreters for public speeches and performances, and the incorporation of design elements in information technology systems that are friendly to adaptive technology.

Programmatic/Policy Environment

This environment involves maximizing participation opportunities for all through the design of accessible programs. It also includes the development of policies that eliminate barriers to programs, such as adapting eligibility requirements (e.g. credit load) for participation in student government, establishing equal opportunity policies that include the protection of people with disabilities, and the designation of a key person to be accountable for disability-related access.

Attitudinal Environment

This environment is the most intangible of the four, primarily because it involves human behavior and perception. Attitudinal barriers include the prevailing negative assumptions perpetuated by society about people with disabilities, such as the portrayal of disabled people as helpless victims or “inspirational.” Changes in the attitudinal environment typically take place through one-on-one interaction with people with disabilities.