WebAIM Provided 844 Free Courses To Celebrate Anniversary | CPD Blog

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WebAIM celebrated its 20th year in 2020 by giving back, and it couldn't have come at a better time.

The WebAIM team, located in the Center for Persons with Disabilities at Utah State University, trains individuals and corporations on web and digital document accessibility. In their anniversary year they gave away free enrollments to their accessible documents course: 772 of them to people belonging to organizations dedicated to quality online education. Another 72 went to people with disabilities themselves—many of whom work in the accessibility field—through WebAIM's scholarship program.

"We wanted to do some things to show our appreciation and give back," said George Joeckel, WebAIM's online training program manager. The course is delivered online in an independent-study format. While the free enrollments to organizations are winding down, scholarships are still available to people with disabilities.

It made a difference, both to individuals and organizations, at a time when educators and businesses rushed to ramp up their online presence. The move to digital emphasized the need not just for accessible websites, but for digital documents and handouts that were accessible to all.

"Making sure that the documents are accessible was a huge issue," said Russ Poulin, the executive director of WCET. The organization focuses on improving the quality of technology-enhanced, higher education, with members from universities all over the US and Canada. WCET members received free enrollments. "We have members who are doing a lot of instruction at a distance… Even more so last year with the forced move to remote instruction for a lot of courses."

Francois Jacobs evaluates organizations' websites—including some from outside academia—from a user's perspective. He lives in Melbourne, Australia, and he is blind. He teaches during the academic season in addition to evaluation work. "I'm not in a financial position to pay for the course, because the work is coming in so irregularly. It really put me on a better path and gave me confidence to address and give better feedback on the work that I do get on the side, so it was really a great opportunity for me," he said. "It's definitely given me a lot more tools and confidence about working in the [accessibility] space."

Inaccessible documents can create a barrier between students and their coursework, said Stephen Smith, executive director of the Association on Higher Education and Disability. (AHEAD is an association for professionals who are committed to equity in higher education among people with disabilities, and it also received some free enrollments to the documents course.)

"Accessibility removes that barrier, and makes our communication structures effective for everyone who wants to access them. And I think that that's just a critical component of the work that we do," Smith said.

It's also critical for people like Huguette Jean-Francois, a courseware developer and instructional designer from Orleans, Ontario, Canada. She said she regularly runs into ableism at work. "Being a person with a disability, I'm always looking for new ways to make my training products accessible to all. Taking this training gave me the opportunity to create accessible templates, to help my colleagues create accessible documents. I became a reference for my co-workers. I have coached them, and that helps change their perception about me."

"I was excited about taking the course because it provided me with the opportunity to update my skills," said Kestrell Verlager, a freelance disability and technology advocate from the Boston, Massachusetts area.

Ultimately, accessible design is good design, said Jim Snyder, director of community engagement and marketing at Quality Matters, a nonprofit dedicated to quality online learning.

Using the right order for headings, for example, is not just good accessibility practice; it also helps make a document easier to understand.

"The whole reason you have those standards is to make the course open and usable for all people," Snyder said. "One of the things we always say is it's not always [just] the benefit of someone with a disability. Everyone can benefit from captioning and alternative text."

Quality Matters also received free enrollments. "We were happy to add an additional benefit to our members," Snyder said.

All three organizations join the CPD in wishing WebAIM many more successful years—and in saying thank you for celebrating in such a generous way. For more information, visit the WebAIM website.