Congress May Boost Online Programs That Aid Students Who Have Disabilities

WASHINGTON-Congress is on the verge of asking colleges to experiment with distance education to help students with disabilities earn degrees.

The legislation, which is being considered as part of the reauthorization of the High Education Act, was written by Rep. Peter Hoekstra, a Michigan Republican who is chairman of the Subcommittee on Select Education of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce. He said that distance education has grown in popularity and can serve as an effective alternative to taking courses on a college campus.

The bill, HR 3076, would add a distance-learning component to an existing grant program run by the Department of Education. The grants pay for colleges to develop methods for helping students with both learning and physical disabilities. But only a handful of the grants currently go to projects that include distance education. The added language is meant to prompt the department to spend more of the money on distance learning.

The grant program, called "Demonstration Projects to Ensure Students with Disabilities Receive a Quality Higher Education," received about $7 million from Congress for this fiscal year. The legislation doesn't change how much money the program receives. Congress would have to decide that in a separate appropriations measure.

Flexibility and Access

The bill has passed the House of Representatives and is under consideration by the Senate.

"The flexibility and access facilitated through distance education and electronic delivery methods also holds tremendous promise for eliminating barriers and expanding access to higher education for students with disabilities—a population whose access to higher education may be somewhat limited by restraints on their hearing, sight, or mobility," Representative Hoekstra said in a written statement.

The idea is that the technology used for distance education can be modified to help students work around their disabilities. A hearing-impaired student who might need an interpreter for classroom lectures could rely on software to transcribe online audio components of distance course. A blind student in a distance course could use a program that reads text aloud. And online courses are convenient for students in wheelchairs.

Closed-Captioned Video

Some institutions are already experimenting with distance-education technology to help students with disabilities. The Rochester Institute of Technology's National Technical Institute for the Deaf, established in 1965, has developed a closed-captioning program to accompany video clips that appear online and on CD-ROM's. The closed-captioning helps the videos meet requirements of the Americans With Disabilities Act.

Joeann Humbert, director of online learning at RIT, said officials there also added a search feature to help disable students find phrases in the captioning.

The search feature has become popular with all RIT students, not just those who are hearing impaired. "By complying with the ADA and coming up with a creative way to handle the captioning, we were actually meeting a student need," Ms. Humbert said.

She doesn't know of any data showing that disabled students prefer distance education. But she says it is a good idea for Congress to help colleges experiment with the idea.

"I see where it makes a lot of sense for students with disabilities to take distance learning, but we don't know if that's where they're going," Ms. Humbert said.

By Dan Carnevale