

Harvard, MIT sued over lack of closed captioning online

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Advocates for the deaf sued Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology on Thursday, saying the universities failed to provide closed captioning for online courses, podcasts and other educational programs.

The National Association for the Deaf filed class action lawsuits in federal court, saying Harvard and MIT discriminated against the hearing impaired and violated the Americans with Disabilities Act.

The association said much of Harvard's and MIT's online content was not captioned, was inaccurately captioned or was unintelligibly captioned, making it inaccessible. Advocates for the deaf say they're not seeking a financial windfall but rather permanent injunctions against the universities mandating that all their online materials include closed captioning, interpretive text displayed onscreen.

"Just as buildings without ramps bar people who use wheelchairs, online content without captions excludes individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing," said the lawsuit against Harvard, which is similar to the one against MIT.

Officials at Harvard and MIT, both based in Cambridge, said they're committed to making their courses and online materials accessible to everyone.

Harvard spokesman Jeff Neal said that new federal rules that will

"provide much-needed guidance in this area" are expected to be proposed this year by the U.S. Department of Justice and that Harvard will follow the new rules.

"Expanding access to knowledge and making online learning content accessible is of vital importance to Harvard and to educational institutions across the country," Neal said.

MIT is including captioning in all new online content, a spokeswoman said.

Harvard, which has about 21,000 undergraduate and graduate students, and MIT, which has about 11,000, offer an array of content online for free. They also are co-founders of edX, which offers students worldwide dozens of free online courses from them and several other universities.

Attorney Bill Lann Lee, who represents the National Association for the Deaf, told The New York Times that Harvard and MIT have been leaders in putting college content online and that a change in their practices would affect other universities' practices.

Christine Griffin, executive director of the Disability Law Center in Boston, said she hoped that would be the case.

"Our hope is that this lawsuit will change not only Harvard's and MIT's practices but set an example for other universities to follow," Griffin told The Boston Globe.

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