Starting a Web Accessibility Program at Your Institution

Or

# How You Can Benefit From What We Learned At Iowa

All institutions have been dealing with ADA problems in their physical environment, but may not have begun a systematic program to address accessibility concerns about their web and IT assets. This session identifies how to begin on strategy, policy, planning, assessment, and implementation.

This session is intended as a roadmap to your institutional options in setting up an accessibility program. It is based on the University of Iowa experience of setting up a program from scratch in the last 5 years. It will identify key topics to consider, strategic issues, models for a program, and resources and check lists to get you started. It will help you understand how to develop an institutional action plan addressing strategy, policy, governance, planning, tools, skills, support, and communication. It also identifies sources of knowledge to get your team up to speed, potential campus partners in an accessibility program, and national resources to track as your program develops. We will touch on major accessibility issues including media captioning, commercial instructional materials, purchased institutional apps, library materials, faculty materials, distance education, PDFs, and accessible web content strategies.

# Introduction

## The Iowa Web Accessibility Project

In 2009, Iowa was motivated by activity affecting peers (the PSU case) and a discouraging public evaluation. There was no policy or organized effort to promote web accessibility.

## Personal strategies

As a 30 year veteran in academic IT administration, I have generally adopted an ‘early follower’ strategy: learn from others, and imitate good models without delay. If a resource is good, dig into its lateral resources.

# Background: Accessible Information and Communication Technologies and the ADA

This is basic information about accessibility that is the foundation of a campus effort.

## ICT as part of ADA

When the ADA was passed in 1990, most of the emphasis was on facility issues and accommodations needed to allow people with disabilities to participate in programs and services of institutions. Over time, it has become clear that physical access is only the first step, and that today, accessible ICT is central to participation. Recent statements from the Department of Justice confirm this in the clearest of terms.

## The POUR Principles of Accessibility

These four principles were originally defined for the web, but they generalize to other technologies:

* Perceivable – the content should be available to the senses, either directly or through assistive technologies
* Operable – users can operate all the controls, through a variety of means including assistive technologies
* Understandable – content and actions are presented in a way that users can understand
* Robust – the technologies are based on standards and principles that are widely supported

## Necessary vocabulary: Accessibility, Assistive Technology, Accommodation, Disability?[interaction environ and individual …]

Accommodation is assistance provided to an individual who has difficultly interacting with an environment. Accommodation often involves assistive technologies, which mediate between the environment and the individual. Accessibility focuses on developing environments which are usable for the widest possible range of users, regardless of their abilities or modes of access.

## Functional vs Technical Accessibility

Technical accessibility refers to conformance to specific accessibility standards for the ICT environment. Functional accessibility refers to the ability of users to carry out the functions for which the ICT was provided – to truly participate.

# Strategies and Action Plans

## Strategy 1: Learn from others

Settlement agreements represent improvement plans determined through negotiations to resolve a law suit, typically originating in a complaint from people who were not able to participate satisfactorily in the institution’s programs and activities. The earlier generation of ADA facility improvement plans also suggest an outline of a systematic method of improving accessibility, if translated from facility language to ICT. Checking out the plans and activities of leading peers can is very informative, and gives a holistic comparison of your institution to others. Lists of settlements and leading institutions will appear in the Resources section below.

## Strategy 2: Make it an effort of many communities

There are many groups of stakeholders who should be engaged. Different communities will have different motivations, and different rules of engagement. This is discussed in more detail in the model for an action plan.

## A model for a project

The model is guided by the terms of various legal settlements of accessibility complaints, and the common form of institutional ADA facility plans.

Policy, plan, communities, resources, timelines, milestones

### Identify sponsors, stakeholders, and leaders of the accessibility program

Sponsorship from a high administrator is valuable; better a president than a plaintiff. A small steering committee representing key stakeholders is more powerful politically than a one-person model. Involving the offices or agencies that have an operational role is valuable.

Stakeholders include …

### Draft, circulate, and adopt a policy

Today, the default technical web policy is WCAG 2.0 AA, unless there are special circumstances like state laws or a heavy federal presence that makes Section 508 more appropriate.

## A common structure for a web accessibility policy

Most recently written web accessibility policies share these common elements:

* Statement of values, vision, mission and/or goals
* Statement of technical standard, usually W3C WCAG 2.0 AA
* Scope (pretty well defined by ADA)
* Initial date
* Rate of progress
* Exceptions, such as student work, archives, static old pages not essential to participation
* Method to complain and handling of complaints
* Maintenance of policy

### Assess current status

This requires a rough estimate of the total web presence, a list of specific commercial applications, a PDF count, and an estimate of how accessible these assets are.

The quality of web servers and other related institutional infrastructure is also important. Good infrastructure leads to better outcomes.

### Inventory stakeholders, participants, and their skills and knowledge

Estimate the population of web designers, application developers, and content providers. These are people who will need appropriate awareness and skills.

### Define support resources

What infrastructure will be needed to support an improvement project. What training, consulting, and assistance will be needed.

### Lay out milestones and time lines

Include triggering events, such as replacement cycles for commercial software. Iowa uses a cycle of 6 month Roadmaps to organize efforts into manageable chunks.

### Determine progress measures and reporting plans

Some form of technical automated assessment will provide useful data. Measures of effort have some value, too.

## Technical guidance on web accessibility

There is more information on this topic than on nearly any other element of accessibility. For planning purposes, it makes sense to divide this consideration into four parts:

* Purchased or externally acquired web content or applications
* Locally created web applications
* Web infrastructure such as content management systems and template systems (web design)
* Web content created by subject matter experts who do not have technical web skills

There are many resources on these topics in the Resource section.

# Special Issues

These topics represent special circumstances that differ from the general problems addressed above.

## Instructional Materials

There are several topics of special concern related to instruction.

### Commercial instructional materials – classroom adoptions

The typical adoption process for textbook materials is conducted at the departmental committee level, far removed from the influence of institutional policies. Presently, many textbooks are accompanied by web or ICT assets that need to be examined for accessibility. [See DSSHE-L list, many references]

### Library materials

Libraries provide instructional materials in the forms of electronic reserves, e-books, and e-journals, as well as scans from existing paper sources. Many of the commercial materials available to libraries aren’t fully accessible. [ARL report in Resources]

### Distance education and moocs

While sometimes instructional accessibility is approached almost entirely through accommodation, this is unacceptable for distance education. Most distance education involves media, so a robust captioning strategy is needed from the beginning. Also materials must be accessible, as well as services .

### Faculty-created materials

Faculty members often create materials at the last moment, and most will not understand the nuances of producing accessible documents. Creating a culture promoting accessibility and workflows that assure that delivered materials are accessible are significant challenges.

## Audio and video media

## Transcripts and captions are essential components of accessible media. Besides addressing the needs of students with disabilities, they provide increased discoverability and flexibility for all students. Unfortunately, creating them is perceived as new work

## PDFs

According to some measures, PDFs are the fastest growing breed of web content. Remediating PDFs to full accessibility is difficult. The basic steps content authors can take to create relatively accessible PDFs are fairly simple, and there are many sources of information and training on this topic

## Institutional purchases

Purchasing policies are part of protecting the future. They can help assure that systems aren’t purchased which create a worse accessibility environment.