



KEY TAKEAWAYS

How Colleges Can Comply With Web-Accessibility Laws



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How Colleges Can Comply With Web-Accessibility Laws

Key Takeaways From a Virtual Forum
Presented by *The Chronicle* and Siteimprove

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New U.S. Department of Justice regulations updating Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) are pushing colleges to make online content accessible to all users. At an estimated cost of \$7 billion to higher education, these changes affect every aspect of digital life in academe — from course materials to administrative services. Many institutions manage websites with millions of pages, all of which must be reviewed and remediated by April 2026.

To explore how colleges can meet this challenge despite their limited resources, *The Chronicle* held a virtual forum on November 19. The following comments, edited for clarity and length, represent key takeaways from the forum. To hear the full discussion, watch the recorded webinar [here](#).

Alexander C. Kafka: Why should private colleges be paying attention to this law that ostensibly applies to public institutions?

Laura Rothstein: They already have some obligation under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act to make their programs and services accessible if they get federal financial assistance. The biggest difference between what's required under 504 and now under Title II relates to course content for faculty members. They should be paying attention, because these requirements will come to them as well.

Kafka: Kristina, what are the priorities in managing this transition for university systems? And what role do you and your team play in that?

Kristina England: Our campuses are all managing their own projects. We're managing a project in the president's office, ensuring that third-party procurement of products is accessible across our system. We're also managing document, web-content, and video remediation in the president's office.

Kafka: In instituting these changes, colleges have some practical assists, including the Voluntary Product Accessibility Template (VPAT) and the Accessibility Checklist in the Higher Education Community Vendor Assessment Toolkit (HECVAT).

Leadership's commitment — from the president on down — seems crucial to accomplishing an effort of this scope. Terrill, can you tell me what that's looked like at the University of Washington? I think it involved your president, the Board of Regents, three campuses, and a medical school.

Terrill Thompson: We've been at this for decades. It takes a high level of administrative buy-in and executive leadership. The ADA rule has been a real catalyst for us. We have a digital-accessibility initiative that fits in a couple of different places within the university's governance structure: There's the enterprise risk-management governance structure as well as the information-and-technology governance structure. There's an ADA digital-accessibility board with oversight. We've got executive sponsorship within IT, the provost's office, and UW Medicine. We have a number of teams organized within this initiative that bring the whole university into the process of collaborating.

Initially, those teams were around problems we needed to solve — web, mobile, course content, procurement, innovation and research. That was in Year 1. In Year 2, we have three teams: The first is for remediation — to work on a backlog of inaccessible content that needs to be fixed. The second is for sustainability — looking beyond the deadline to develop new ways of creating and procuring content that doesn't continuously need to be retrofitted. The third is for change management — to find new ways of doing things and ensure we're always inclusive when we innovate.

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Kafka: The law deals with more than course content. Colleges have to think about virtual tours as well as materials for prospective students, alumni, and advancement. What's the scope of what these institutions are looking at — or should be looking at?

Rothstein: Along with information provided through the web for faculty and staff, members of the public are affected by this, too — those who might buy a ticket to the football game or make a clinic appointment.

Here's what's different now for courses: In the past, faculty members would be notified if they had students in their classes who needed accessible course content and then they'd make sure they had it — videos with audio descriptors, for instance. Now it's required to

be done up front. It's a much bigger expectation. I'm not sure all campuses are prepared for that. It puts more burden on faculty members.

England: Looking at all third-party products — those used by employees, students, and members of the public — is going to be key for universities, along with updating procurement processes and posting accessible social-media content, which is also part of the new requirements.

Kafka: Does this law only impact public-facing web content or does it also have implications for internal content directed to employees?

Rothstein: It applies to internal content as well, including emails to faculty and staff, which may be a surprise to smaller universities. I really worry about community colleges, because they don't have the staff and other assets that may be needed.

Kafka: It's not federal enforcement as much as private lawsuits that are likely to hold colleges' feet to the fire on this, right?

Rothstein: I think so. If a member of the public wants to buy a football ticket or make an appointment with a university clinic and those processes aren't accessible, that person is going to be able to bring an action. Enrolled students could also bring actions, saying course content isn't accessible. There's a real role for university counsels to alert campus leaders to this, since individual faculty members refusing to do this could put them in a position of liability. There needs to be a process for ensuring that faculty have the resources to do what they're supposed to do.

Kafka: It seems like PDFs are a particularly thorny issue. For instance, if you're doing an audio version of them, but they're not formatted correctly, they just read like jammed-together gobbledygook, right?

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Thompson: Yeah, a tagged structure is critical — headings or lists of items coded specifically as such. Everybody creates PDFs — millions of people worldwide — but often they don't have the technical expertise even to understand what's necessary to make them accessible, let alone to remediate if they're created something inaccessible. We want to get people to ask whether a PDF is really the best way to deliver their content and, if so, how they can do it accessibly.

Rothstein: It may be intuitive to tech experts, but it's not to the average faculty member. It's going to be really rocky for about a year. This is a lot of new learning for most of them.

Cyndi Wiley: PDF remediation — and the amount of these documents — is the bane of my existence. We have hundreds of thousands in use, and on our campus PDFs have been overused — and misused — for decades. Instead of asking whether they're the right format, we've spent years and significant resources trying to fix what is inherently problematic.

One unit on our campus recently spent multiple years — and some grant funding — for a couple of full-time positions remediating thousands of PDFs, yet this is a reactive approach that doesn't have accessibility in mind from the beginning. I like campaigns to get rid of PDFs. The skillset needed to remediate is pretty high, and typically faculty and staff just don't have time to learn it. Also, if it costs \$5 a page to remediate, and you have an 80-page PDF, that's a lot of money.

England: We've been advising people to keep documents in their original formats — in PowerPoint, Word, or Excel — or moving it to an HTML format.

Thompson: We've invested quite a bit within our learning-management system — multiple tools for faculty to make course content more accessible. One of them evaluates the accessibility of uploaded content, giving it a score and providing feedback on how to improve

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its accessibility. We also have tools helping instructors get rid of older content, which is a big part of our strategy, or archive stuff that can be archived.

Kafka: What conversations should faculty be having with students about these issues? On the one hand, student-generated material could be another source of liability, but this could also be a teachable moment to remind students that some of their classmates looking at this material might not be able to see or hear that well or move a cursor around.

Rothstein: It is a teachable moment. The liability concern is probably lower in that context — there'll be more forgiveness for good-faith attempts. There may not be the same requirements for something used only in a classroom, as opposed to what's then put on a teaching site, but I'd strongly encourage students, for example, to make sure videos have closed captions or audio descriptors and make PowerPoints accessible.

Wiley: We're essentially saying the same thing. We have campuswide training and a reporting form for students encountering inaccessible course content from faculty. It's about building awareness.

Kafka: Are there new structures — or guidelines — on your campuses for staff who deal with campus housing, parking, food services and the like?

Wiley: The touch-screen kiosks in the dining center need to be accessible. We're trying to say that anything students, faculty, and staff need to interact with as part of their experience with our campus — in person or digitally — needs to follow the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines and ADA Title II.

Rothstein: I'd strongly encourage all universities to have a place or a portal where people can go with accessibility problems — or an ADA coordinator. A lot of these problems can be headed off by getting to the right person quickly.

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Kafka: What do you recommend for administrators at the department level as they're working with faculty on these issues?

Rothstein: I see academic deans and department heads facing a big challenge in the next year. I don't think there are enough resources on many campuses to provide IT support to help faculty. I'd encourage top leadership to be working right away on this, budgeting for it, and maybe hiring some additional IT people to come in for a period of time and assist faculty one on one. Training can be good, but many faculty need one-on-one support.

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