



THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO DIGITAL ACCESSIBILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

**Keys to Removing Digital Barriers so You Can Attract
and Retain More Students**

INTRODUCTION

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, **11 percent of undergraduate students in the United States have a disability.**

Selecting a postsecondary school can be an overwhelming process for any student. For people with physical or cognitive disabilities, accessibility barriers make their decision even more challenging.

In addition to navigating programs and financial aid, students with disabilities must gain access to tools that will help them excel in their studies and participate in campus life.

However, many postsecondary institutions fail to provide these tools.

Most schools understand that they need to make their website WCAG 2.0 compliant to help students who are blind, deaf, and have other disabilities. However, campuses must go further to accommodate all students with disabilities. For example, **Section 504** of the Rehabilitation Act requires schools to provide video captioning – along with audio transcripts – for people who are deaf or hard of hearing. Any institution that receives federal funding must comply with **Section 504**.

Postsecondary schools must make their digital environments fully accessible to attract and retain students with disabilities. Consider how students who are blind or have low vision use screen

readers or magnification software to view online content. If an institution's website isn't accessible, students will not be able to read what's on the screen. How can they make an informed decision if they can't read the page?

A 2016 accessibility progress report also found that 70 percent of major universities don't make assistive technologies available. Schools must integrate these technologies with their digital platforms to meet the needs of students with disabilities.

This white paper outlines best practices for digital accessibility so that you can enhance students' experience and remove their barriers to education.



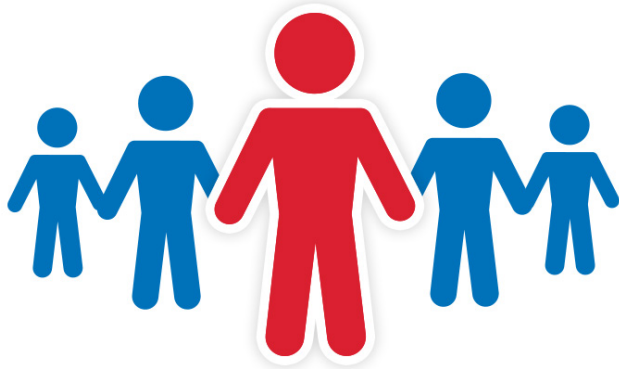
Who Will Benefit From Reading This White Paper?

This document is for postsecondary institutions that want to give students with disabilities a seamless digital experience. It will assist:

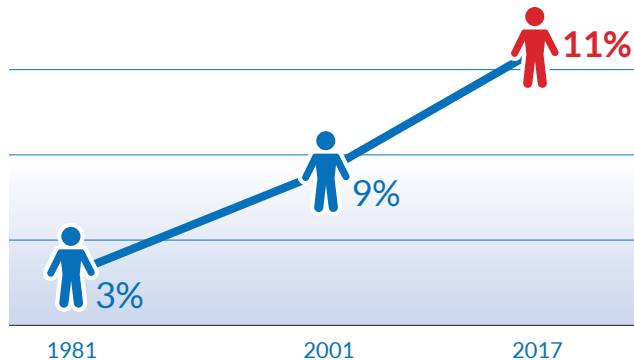
- An institution's president and provosts
- Website administrators and IT professionals
- Heads of student life and student services
- Disability and accessibility services professionals

ARE YOU HELPING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES OVERCOME BARRIERS TO EDUCATION? OR ARE YOU CREATING BARRIERS?

More than **4.2 million** school-aged children in the U.S. have a disability.¹



In 1981, just three percent of undergraduate students in the U.S. had disabilities.² By 2017, this number increased to 11 percent, meaning that more than 2.25 million students with disabilities currently attend U.S. colleges and universities.



Percentage of Higher Education Institutions that Enroll Students With Disabilities³

Two- and four-year postsecondary institutions that grant title IV degrees:

88%



Public two- and four-year postsecondary institutions:

99%



Medium and large institutions:

100%



¹ University of New Hampshire Institute on Disability, 2014 Disability Statistics Annual Report (2014)

² Institute for Higher Education Policy, Higher Education Opportunities for Students with Disabilities (2004)

³ IES National Center for Education Statistics, Students with Disabilities at Degree-Granting Post-Secondary Institutions (2011)

Although almost every higher education institution in the U.S. enrolls students with disabilities, few are truly prepared to help them succeed with their degree.

Despite schools' attempts to be accessible, students with disabilities still face many barriers to higher education.

These barriers often start from a student's initial interaction with a college or university. A prospective student's first step might be visiting a website to research how well it can accommodate their needs. If the site is inaccessible, students with disabilities can't easily find the information that they're looking for.

If students overcome these barriers and enroll, they will face other accessibility challenges throughout their education. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, **just 16.4 percent of people with disabilities have completed at least a bachelor's degree, compared with 34.6 percent of people without a disability.**⁴

One reason for this gap is that many institutions simply don't have the right support systems in place for students with disabilities. For example, if a school doesn't provide assistive learning technologies, students with disabilities will face barriers when accessing distance learning programs and participating in class discussions.



Rachel Kolb, a 2013 Rhodes Scholar and Ph.D. student who was born profoundly deaf, gave a TEDx talk where she outlined the problems that students with auditory disabilities have in college. She said that only a third of deaf children finish high school and of those that do go to college only a fifth complete their degree.⁵

Prospective students must know that their campus will go beyond basic accessibility to provide them with an inclusive educational experience that builds a solid foundation for their future employment.

Meanwhile, current students must access technologies that help them perform well in class and take advantage of everything their campus offers.



⁴ U.S. Department of Labor/U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, People with a disability less likely to have completed a bachelor's degree (2015)

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uKKpivPd6Xo>

WHY HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS MUST MAKE DIGITAL ACCESSIBILITY A TOP PRIORITY

Schools that fail to offer an accessible digital experience miss opportunities to attract students and provide them with a barrier-free experience.

However, many colleges and universities may not know where to start with digital accessibility. Smaller institutions with limited resources struggle to keep up with regulations and may not be aware of every component that goes into making digital properties accessible.

Standards, Regulations, and Guidelines

Reasonable Accommodations

Higher education institutions are required to provide reasonable accommodation to students with disabilities. In the U.S., standards and regulations such as the **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)** and **Section 504** provide the foundation for accessibility.

Section 504

Section 504 is a civil rights law that prohibits discrimination against students with disabilities. It ensures that children with disabilities have equal access to education, including accommodations and modifications. Institutions that receive federal funding must adhere to **Section 504**. All schools – regardless of whether or not they receive federal funding – must abide by the ADA.

Who does Section 504 help?



Meet Kartik Sawhney, a Stanford University student who is blind. He uses a screen reader that reads aloud any text on his computer screen. However, not all websites are designed to work properly with screen readers. In a 2015 NPR interview⁶, Sawhney described the frustration of encountering inaccessible web pages. This frustration inspired him to study computer science, so he can improve the way people “hear” graphs and charts.

But failure to prioritize accessibility can lead to the following:

- The inability to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0. The ADA can obtain civil penalties of up to \$55,000 for the first violation and \$110,000 for each subsequent violation.⁵
- Loss of funding from the U.S. government for failing to comply with Section 504 of the U.S. Rehabilitation Act.
- A decline in enrollment, as students with disabilities choose schools that better meet their needs.
- Damage to your reputation when word spreads that you do not provide students with disabilities equal opportunities.
- Lawsuits from legal firms and advocacy groups.

Americans with Disabilities Act

The **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)** came into being in 1990. It is a *‘civil rights law that prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in all areas of public life, including jobs, schools, transportation, and all public and private places that are open to the general public.’* The civil rights granted under the ADA are the same as those granted to individuals based on sex, age, race, religion, and national origin. Private colleges, under Title III of the ADA, must provide equal access to all students, including those with disabilities.

Web Content Accessibility Guidelines

The World Wide Web Consortium’s **Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG)** are the universally accepted technical guidelines for web accessibility. It contains three levels: level A, level AA, and level AAA. Level AA is the recommended level for most standards and regulations.

⁵ <https://www.disabled-world.com/disability/ada/ada-law-accessibility.php>

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uKKpivPd6Xo>

THE KEY TO ATTRACTING AND RETAINING MORE STUDENTS

What is Digital Accessibility?

Digital accessibility is more than just ensuring that people with limited sight or hearing can read their course materials and engage with their school's website. Complete accessibility creates a seamless digital experience for both on-campus and distance learners, regardless of their ability.

Higher education institutions looking to attract this segment must implement a comprehensive digital accessibility solution.

In doing so, they give students with disabilities a seamless digital experience and set them up for success in both the classroom and their future careers.

Accessible schools also mitigate the risks of lawsuits and project a disability-friendly environment to students, prospective students, and their communities.

5 ESSENTIAL THINGS TO LOOK FOR IN A DIGITAL ACCESSIBILITY SOLUTIONS PROVIDER

Your digital accessibility solution must go beyond the basics. In addition to WCAG 2.0 compliance, look for a solution that offers the following:

1. Functional testing by people with disabilities

When organizations make their websites accessible, their developers or third-party vendors typically run automated usability tests. However, these tests only capture 25 percent to 30 percent of accessibility issues.

Look for a solution that offers manual testing by people with disabilities. They can catch the real-world issues that would prevent students with disabilities from using your site.

2. Assistive technology

Assistive technology accommodates people who have difficulty typing, moving a mouse, reading a screen, or using a touch-screen smartphone. It allows them to easily navigate your website to research programs, register for events, and participate in campus life.

The right assistive technology solution will integrate with your existing website and mobile app, giving students with disabilities a consistent experience across all your digital channels.

3. Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices

When you include AAC devices in your digital accessibility toolkit, you make it easier for people with no or poor speech to communicate with you. They can use the technology to browse your website, speak with your admissions team, and take part in class discussions.

4. Compliance

Your digital accessibility solution should help you meet the **WCAG 2.0** technical requirements to comply with standards such as the **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Section 508** or its refresh, the 21st Century **Communications and Video Accessibility Act (CVAA)**, or any relevant standards applicable to your country and industry.

Additionally, ensure that you put a monitoring system in place and create an accessibility policy or statement. Finally, make sure that you always include people with disabilities throughout the process, which includes functional testing.

5. PDF remediation and multimedia accessibility

Digital accessibility doesn't end with your website. To provide an inclusive learning experience, you must ensure that all your content and multimedia files are accessible.

Look for a solution that remediates your PDFs so that they are properly tagged and compliant with relevant standards.

Also, be sure to provide multimedia content in formats that people with disabilities can read. For example, your videos should be captioned for the deaf, and your text files should have audio descriptions for the blind.

GO BEYOND THE BASICS TO GIVE STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES A SEAMLESS AND INCLUSIVE DIGITAL EXPERIENCE

eSENTIAL Accessibility has developed a comprehensive solution to help higher education institutions provide students with disabilities a barrier-free online experience.

We provide both assistive technology and digital accessibility in one solution to help you:

Enhance your digital experience for students with disabilities

You can rest assured that your site is user-friendly, as we provide ongoing feedback from people with disabilities. They use multiple assistive technologies to test your website and pinpoint any potential barriers faced by students with disabilities.

Remain compliant

We ensure compliance with technical requirements such as **WCAG 2.0**, and regulations such as **Section 504** and **508** of the Rehabilitation Act, **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)**, and **CVAA** standards. We do this through ongoing testing, training, and monitoring, along with assistive technology.

Showcase your school as a disability-friendly institution

Each month, more than 100 million people visit websites that feature eSENTIAL Accessibility. Our recognizable, interactive icon shows visitors that you are committed to meeting the needs of students with disabilities.

eSENTIAL ACCESSIBILITY IN ACTION

Texas Tech University Health Science Center El Paso (TTUHSC El Paso) set out to improve the accessibility of its digital properties and comply with **Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act**.

The university partnered with eSENTIAL Accessibility to implement a comprehensive accessibility solution and achieve the following results:

- An enhanced digital experience for students, faculty, staff, and web visitors with disabilities
- Projecting a disability-friendly environment to students and members of the community
- Compliance with **Section 508** of the Rehabilitation Act

The infographic provides a comprehensive overview of TTUHSC El Paso's digital accessibility journey. It begins with the university's founding in 1973 and its composition of three schools: Paul L. Foster School of Medicine, Cook-Correll School of Nursing, and Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences. It highlights that more than 600 students are enrolled and that the center provides over \$29 million in uncompensated care services to the El Paso community every year. A 'Disability by the Numbers' section shows a line graph from 1981 to 2017, indicating that in 1981, only 2% of undergraduate students in the U.S. reported having a disability, which rose to 11% by 2017. The infographic also states that in 2017, there were over 2.2 billion people with disabilities enrolled in a college or university. The 'THE GOAL' section outlines the aim to improve TTUHSC El Paso's accessibility and digital properties to meet the requirements of Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act. 'THE SOLUTION' section lists several key actions: technical and functional testing of the website, accessibility training and education for staff, ongoing monitoring and reporting, and a focus on user-centered design. 'THE BENEFITS' section lists: providing a seamless digital experience, projecting a disability-friendly environment, and ensuring compliance with Section 508. A quote from Tammy Salazar, Ph.D., TTUHSC El Paso Director of Academic and Disability Support, is included at the bottom: 'Allowing people with disabilities to have equal access to our digital platforms is an extension of our mission to improve the overall accessibility of health education in our community.'



"Allowing people with disabilities to have equal access to our digital platforms is an extension of our mission to improve the overall accessibility of health education in our community."

Tammy Salazar, Ph.D., TTUHSC El Paso Director of Academic and Disability Support



Are You Ready to Give Students with Disabilities a Barrier-Free Digital Experience?

Request a demo of eSSENTIAL Accessibility now.



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