GOALS

Gaining **O**nline **A**ccessible **L**earning through **S**elf-study

Leading the Charge: Ensuring Your Institution's Web Presence Works for Everyone

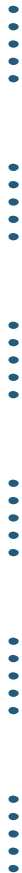NCDAE | National Center on Disability and Access to Education

Utah State University
CENTER FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

GOALS

Leading the Charge: Ensuring Your Institution's
Web Presence Works for Everyone

Partners

Please see full acknowledgements on pages 16-17

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Gaining **O**nline **A**ccessible **L**earning through **S**elf-study (GOALS) is a project led by the National Center on Disability & Access to Education (NCDAE) at Utah State University's (USU) Center for Persons with Disabilities. (CPD). Its partners include:

WebAIM
Web Accessibility In Mind

KENTUCKY COUNCIL ON
POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

SREB

SACSCOC

michigan community college
VIRTUAL LEARNING COLLABORATIVE
A project of the Michigan Community College Association

WICHE
Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education

Leading the Charge: Ensuring Your Institution's Web Presence Works for Everyone •◖

STUDENTS, STAFF, FACULTY, and alumni alike use the institutional web for everything from online teaching and learning to critical administrative functions. In 2009 almost 12 million students took some or all of their classes online and this growth is exponential, with estimates of over 22 million by 2014[1]. Online course components are used by both distance education and traditional campus-based courses, making the number of students using the web significantly higher. In addition, roughly four of every five faculty and staff members are online[2], engaged in critical functions for their employers. However, for the 8.5% of the U.S. population that have at least one disability that impacts computer and internet use[3], inaccessible websites can inhibit or severely restrict their participation in postsecondary settings. While modern assistive technologies and digital media can provide unprecedented access to information and services for students, faculty, and staff with disabilities, ***equal participation assumes equal access***. When websites are not accessible to those with disabilities, the potential for this participation is lost.

Definition

"Web accessibility refers to the practice of making websites usable by people of all abilities and disabilities[a]."

By the Numbers

12%–Undergraduates
6.7%–Graduate Students

Percentage of students who reported some form of disability[b].

Who can use your institution's web site?

Those who:

- *Are blind*
- *Have low vision*
- *Are deaf*
- *Are hard of hearing*
- *Are unable to use a mouse or keyboard*
- *Have learning disabilities*

This represents a potential user base in the US of over **23.2 million**[c].

Increased awareness of the need for accessible websites alone has yet to make the necessary changes in postsecondary education. Studies over a 10-year period consistently reveal that, despite awareness campaigns and a plethora of available resources, ***the accessibility of web content in education remains a problem***[4]. A 2008 study that examined the accessibility of postsecondary education web pages found that 97% of the institutions in its nationwide sample contained accessibility issues[5]. It is an unfortunate reality that web accessibility is not happening on its own. ***Administrative leadership is needed*** to promote and ensure an accessible web presence. In fact, leadership and support of system-wide accessibility efforts are cited as key elements in ***enterprise-wide transformation***[6]. Given the many issues faced by administrators today, why should they care about web accessibility? The answer is simple. ***Web accessibility:***

- Reflects institutional mission, leadership, & values.
- Serves ALL constituents.
- Makes sound fiscal policy.
- Adds value to every web activity.

Call for Action: *Eliminate the digital divide. Ensure that web accessibility is an evaluated part of your institution's comprehensive plans. In doing so, you will see broad benefits.*

Web Accessibility Reflects Institutional Mission, Leadership & Values

AN INSTITUTION'S WEB presence is a visible manifestation of institutional values. When accessible, it *promotes the institution as socially responsible* and engaged with the needs of both the campus and broader community. Most importantly, it underscores an institution's *commitment to quality* student outcomes, employee productivity, and supports diversity at all levels.

When a leader's commitment to web accessibility is echoed in the institution's strategic plan, values become aligned and *students and staff members benefit*. Strategic planning on web accessibility is also *advantageous during the accreditation or reaffirmation process.* For example, the standards and criteria of the regional accrediting bodies that represent higher education underscore issues such as: providing quality education and services to all students, a policy of non-discrimination, a focus on public service, support for lifelong learning, and an emphasis on ethics and integrity[7]. Any of these items can be referenced during reaffirmation when describing web accessibility efforts.

Mission Statements

*While **86%** of institutional mission statements contain language supportive of web accessibility in postsecondary education[d], many institutions have yet to incorporate web accessibility into their institutional plan.*

# Web Accessibility Serves ALL Constituents

Higher Education Employees

4.9% *of employees in higher education, training, and library services reported some form of disability[e].*

STUDENT SUCCESS IS a result of policy, planning, and process. A reactive approach to students' needs creates unnecessary delays when timing is of the essence. ***Students feel the effects*** if they are unable to access web-based course materials at the same time as their peers, or if they must wait for after-the-fact accommodation of institutional processes (e.g., registration, financial aid, student employment, housing options). ***Inaccessible web content affects timeliness, student experience, and student learning***, which in turn can affect student outcomes, satisfaction, and persistence. Moreover, in today's technology rich environment, pedagogical principles such as just-in-time learning, engaged learning, student-centered instruction and other hallmarks of effectiveness in educational service[8] are lost if a student must wait for accommodations due to an inaccessible web site.

Working with the internet has become an integral part of most academic job descriptions. Faculty and staff in postsecondary settings are expected to be on par with their students who are already digital natives[9]. Many essential operations including test delivery and course administration are handled through online learning management systems, and critical administrative functions such as financial tracking and student enrollment have
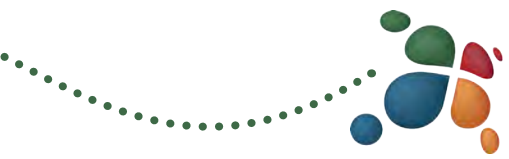
largely migrated to an online infrastructure. In order for many faculty and staff to **effectively and efficiently perform their jobs**, they must be able to work within these programs and access other necessary online information and materials without having to wait for accommodations or rely on others to assist them.

The utility of the web in recruiting students, faculty, and staff is incontrovertible. Over 65% of college bound students reported that the web was more valuable than print resources in determining the postsecondary institution they wished to attend[10]. A 2006 Pew internet study found that 42% of Americans said that the **internet played a major role** as they decided on a college for themselves or their children, and 14% said that the internet played a major role as they switched jobs[11]. Given the significance of an institution's web site in the **recruitment of potential students, faculty, and staff**, a web site that exhibits an understanding and concern for the needs of its students and employees with disabilities is more likely to attract and retain those it wishes to recruit. An accessible web presence underscores an institution's **commitment to diversity** and can aid in efforts to achieve and retain a diverse student population and workforce. Retention is especially critical when you consider that the estimated cost for recruiting a single student to a 4-year institution ranges from $400 - $2,000[12] !

Sachin Dev Pavithran, a student and employee who is blind, comments:

*"…**inaccessible websites make it difficult** for me to do any online research that is associated with my school or job. Having to wait for assistance or materials while my peers have instant access is **frustrating and limits my opportunities** for participation, which in return could also be an obstacle for me for any advancement at my place of employment[f]."*

- *Online donations **increased 37%** between 2005 and 2006.*

- *Online donors tend to be **more generous.***

- ***Over 65% of donors** use the internet as a resource before donating.*

The institutional web site helps to ***build and maintain relationships*** with the local community and alumni who look to it for information on institutional activities, academic programs, or even sporting events. Moreover, college websites are proving to be an ***important fundraising and development tool***. A CASE (Council for the Advancement and Support of Education) survey reported that $4.8 million dollars were ***raised online*** by the 100 schools responding to its survey[13]. The need for accessible websites is becoming even more apparent as baby-boomers, and an increasing number of alumni, approach retirement. Ensuring an accessible web site may be crucial to development efforts since aging populations do experience disability or diminished function[14] at a higher rate than younger people.

Web Accessibility Makes Sound Fiscal Policy

As POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTIONS face repeated economic challenges, finding ways to improve efficiency and reduce costs while maintaining quality is essential. Too often accommodations for inaccessible web content are made after-the-fact when the student or faculty requests them. Although this may meet the legal requirements (i.e., to supply reasonable

accommodations for students under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, and for employees and other community members under the Americans with Disabilities Act), it can lead to an inefficient use of limited resources. This inefficiency is similar to retrofitting a house after it is built. It costs more in the long run. **When web content is created once**, rather than recreated or repurposed to provide access to some, **it will cost less** to do so.

Moreover, when an institution relies on after-the-fact fixes and accommodations, it can lead to an inequitable situation for those with disabilities. Often these accommodations take time and those with disabilities must rely on the work schedule and load of others while their peers can access necessary information at any time. This leads to significant disadvantages for students and staff and is increasingly a focus of legal complaints.[15] Courts have consistently found in favor of plaintiffs when the issues affect[16]:

> *Timeliness:* Is the material ready when the student or employee needs it?

> *Effective communication:* Are the materials as effective in conveying the same information— including content contained in hyperlinks?

Contents of a DOE Resolution letter

*"If guidelines to ensure access are made available to colleges now, such information on how to structure distance learning programs and campus webpages will not only ensure that colleges meet their **legal obligations** but will also enable colleges to **save significant expense** over the later cost of 'retrofitting' these programs after substantial investment has been made in inaccessible structures[h]."*

Complaints and litigation can be expensive for any institution. The United States has many protections in place to ensure that persons with disabilities receive equal treatment under the law. The Department of Justice recently clarified that the web is covered under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)[17]. Students, staff, and faculty with disabilities are more informed than ever regarding these laws and their civil rights. Activists and advocate groups are effective in securing equal participation in higher education. An institution with an inaccessible web presence is in danger of becoming the target of a complaint or lawsuit that, regardless of the outcome, could result in negative publicity and costs to the institution. While an enterprise-wide commitment to web accessibility does not guarantee protection from complaints or suits, an active and enforced policy **demonstrates good faith** and can help mitigate the effects.

Current web standards recommend that accessible content is integrated into web design from the outset[18]. **Accessible websites provide better value** for students, faculty, and staff with disabilities. They are also more efficient, allowing those tasked with providing accommodations to focus on special needs rather than having to spend time and limited resources on fixes that could easily have been incorporated in the initial development.

Accessible design does not need to affect the quality or the look and feel of an institutional web site or that of its programs.

Requirements for digital accessibility are now starting to appear in grants and contracts funded by many sources, including the U.S. federal government, many state and international governments, and private foundations. It is important that an institution be equipped to address new requirements in proposal narratives. If the accessibility of web content and resulting digital products from research are not addressed, institutions may lose points during the review process, thereby losing a **competitive edge**. Of course, failure to acknowledge stipulations in existing grants could result in a violation of the terms of an already awarded contract.

One growing mechanism to fight increasing budget challenges is the educational collaborative. Many institutions have embraced coordinated efforts as a way to stretch limited resources. Faculty sharing and course delivery arrangements are now part of most regional educational collaboratives[19]. They provide a venue to disseminate and administer courses across their member institutions. As institutions within these collaborates adopt policies that mandate web accessibility to specified standards,

*Increased Return
On Investment*

After improving site accessibility, a UK financial company, Legal & General Group, noted:

- *Search Engine Referrals **increased 28%** in the first 24 hours.*

- *Site maintenance costs **decreased by 66%**.*

- *A **100% return on investment** was seen in 12 months*[k].

*Does your campus want to compete globally? If so, web accessibility will be required.*

*Currently **149** countries are signatory states to the UN's Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (**101** have ratified). In it are stipulations for web accessibility[1].*

those institutions that do not meet these criteria may find their ***collaboration opportunities*** limited.

The demand for web accessibility extends beyond the borders of the United States. Many countries including the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Mexico, Japan, and the European Union have regulations requiring web accessibility for content used within their borders—even if the content is created and housed elsewhere. If an institution wishes to ***compete and collaborate in an increasingly global market***, it will need to ensure that its web content meets the accessibility standards of other countries[20].
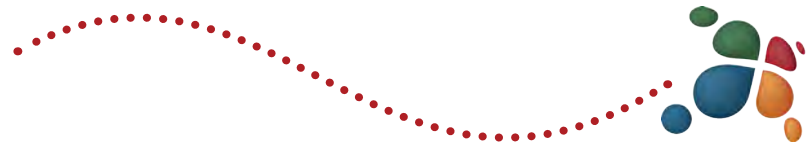
Web Accessibility Adds Value

Accessible web content offers benefits for more than students and employees with disabilities. In the physical world, curb cuts—the breaks in sidewalks that allow wheelchair access—are also useful for parents with strollers, people with carts, skateboarders, cyclists, and many others[21]. In a virtual environment, ***accessibility features are useful for many groups*** as well. For example,

captioning web-based video content provides multi-modal support for different learning styles and helps index content so it can be searched. Moreover, captioned media can be used by those in noisy environments, by those without computer speakers or headphones, or in situations when sound and noise is prohibited such as in a library or lab. Finally, it can be used by students for whom English is a second language as a tool to improve both understanding of the content and overall language skills[22].

Accessible web pages can ***promote technology innovation*** on campus. Accessible content:

- Generally loads more quickly in browsers.
- Requires less bandwidth.
- Is easier to maintain and update.
- Tends to have a higher return in prominent search engines (e.g., Google,)[23]; thus the resources required for search engine optimization can be reduced.

Furthermore, standards-compliant websites are more likely to be compatible with newer browsers and emerging technologies[24]. Institutions that desire to offer services and information to netbooks, mobile phones and other hand-held devices will benefit if their content is already accessible and if they have systems in place to sustain accessibility[25].

Mobile Web

73% *of Americans ages 18-29 use their mobile phones or PDAs for non-voice data activities on a daily basis*[m].

Google: a user who is blind

*"…the biggest blind user on the Internet is named **Google**. This good coding makes you Google friendly. And by Google friendly, I mean every search engine on the planet*[n]*."*

Meeting the Need

While it is important to have those on campus who have an individual dedication to web accessibility, *far-reaching solutions must be enterprise-wide*. The decentralized nature of most institutions can marginalize the work done by individual champions or even departments. Often accessible web content is surrounded by inaccessible content beyond the control of those developing with access in mind. Because the interconnected nature of the web requires that an individual navigate around a site, not a page, the most accessible web page in the world is still inaccessible if a user with disabilities must navigate inaccessible pages to get to it[26].

Successful implementation of web accessibility requires system-level action[27]. An enterprise-wide commitment to web accessibility can provide value beyond the obvious benefits to students and employees with disabilities. *Leaders must help staff* understand why enterprise-wide web accessibility is important and provide the resources and motivation to make it happen.

As an informed leader, *now is the time to "lead the charge"* for enterprise-wide accessibility. Promote and support web accessibility across your institution's web presence. Ensure that your institution is at the forefront of the coming web accessibility revolution. It's not only the *right thing* to do, it's the *smart thing* to do.

Project GOALS Assists Concerned Leaders ●

To assist postsecondary leaders and their staffs in creating and maintaining an accessible web presence, *Project GOALS* (Gaining Online Accessible Learning through Self-study) has developed a collection of materials and processes specifically tailored to help postsecondary institutions plan for, and achieve, enterprise-wide web accessibility. These materials have culminated in the GOALS *Web Accessibility Benchmarking & Planning Tool*.
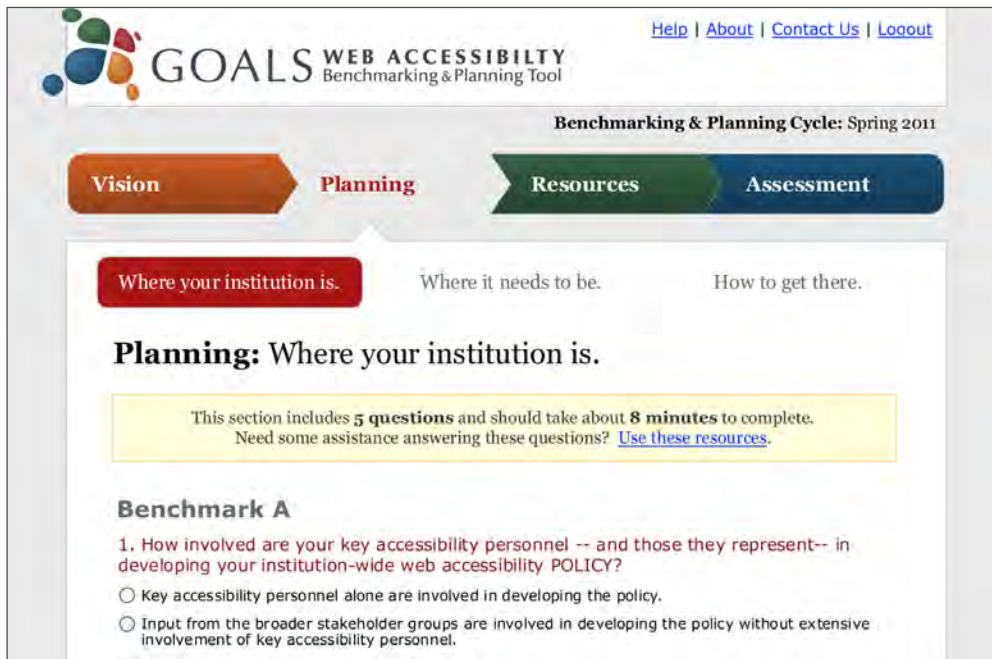

Figure 1: Screen shot of "Where your institution is" in the GOALS Web Accessibility Benchmarking & Planning Tool

This **web-based tool** consists of a set of institutional indicators and benchmarks that outline best practices. It guides the institution's appointed team through a process of self-study via a series of questions, which are used to **create a snapshot** of the institution's web accessibility. In order to assist the team in creating a **customized action plan** for improving accessibility, the tool provides resources, generates reports and allows institutions to compare the results of their current cycle of assessment with previous ones—or even other institutions.

If you would like to learn more about the Web Accessibility & Planning Tool or any of the GOALS materials, **visit ncdae.org/goals.** ◗°

Figure 2: Screen shot of "Where it needs to be" in the GOALS Web Accessibility Benchmarking & Planning Tool
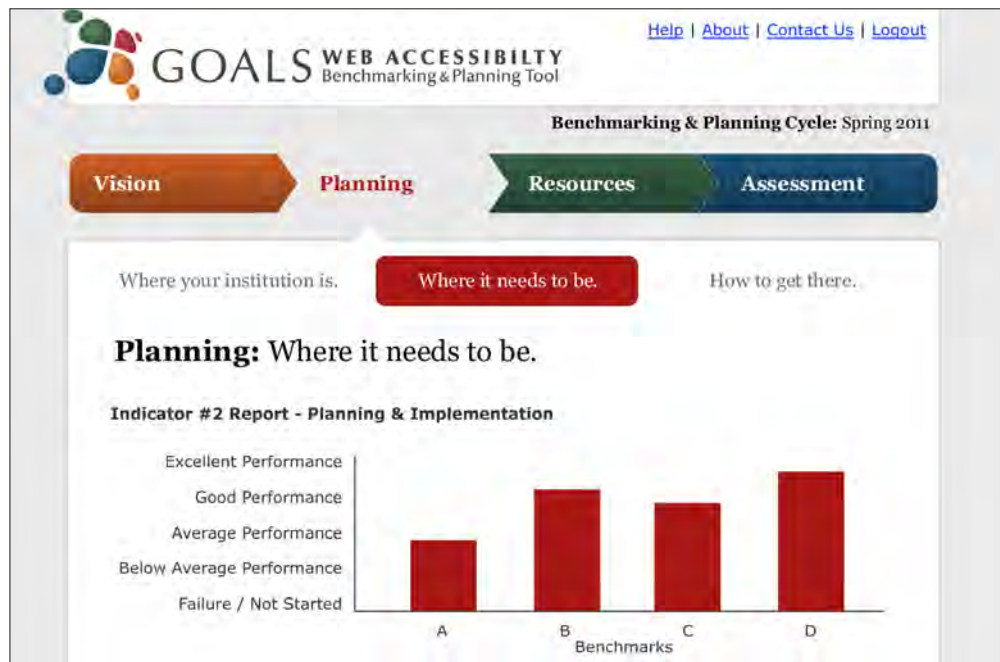
Indicators at a Glance

This at-a-glance document shows the Project GOALS framework for measuring institutional accessibility, which is determined by four key *indicators*, and expressed through a series of *benchmarks* for each indicator. The complete document further develops each benchmark by looking at the strength of institutional *evidence*.

1. Institutional Vision and Leadership Commitment

- *Commitment of administrative leadership*
- *Relevant stakeholder participation*

2. Planning and Implementation

- *Inclusion of key personnel*
- *Comprehensive accessibility policy*
- *Comprehensive written accessibility plan*
- *Implementation of the written plan*

3. Resources and Support

- *Sufficient time and effort allocated to personnel*
- *Focus on personnel*
- *Budget sufficient to meet stated plan*
- *Training and technical support*
- *Procurement, development, and use of technologies that will result in accessible web content*

4. Assessment

- *Evaluation of progress on institutional implementation*
- *Evaluation of web accessibility outcomes*
- *Assessment used to improve institutional accessibility*

To view the complete indicators document, please visit **ncdae.org/goals/indicators.php**

Acknowledgements

GOALS — *Gaining Online Accessible Learning through Self-study — is a project led by the National Center on Disability & Access to Education (NCDAE) at Utah State University's (USU) Center for Persons with Disabilities. (CPD).*

FIPSE funded the original GOALS project (2007-2011) to assist administrators and institutional leaders in understanding the importance of web accessibility and to act on that awareness. With the National Center on Disability and Access to Education as the lead, this consortium included the Kentucky Council on Post Secondary Education, Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, Southern Regional Education Board, and WebAIM.

This project produced:

- **Action Paper:** This paper outlines the need for accessible web content in education. ncdae.org/goals/actionpaper.php
- **Best Practice Indicators:** This document can assist in reflection and review, or as the basis for an institutional self-study. ncdae.org/goals/indicators.php
- **GOALS Benchmarking and Planning Tool:** This online tool provides a framework for formal institutional self-study of web accessibility. ncdae.org/goals/planningtool.php

FIPSE has funded a new effort that extends the earlier work of GOALS. During this project (2011-2014), a national consortium will strengthen the work of GOALS with blueprints useful for both institutions and regional accreditation entities. With the National Center on Disability and Access to Education again as the lead, this consortium includes the Southern Regional Education Board, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, Michigan Community College Virtual Learning Collaborative, Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education, and WebAIM.

This project will work with partners to:

- Create a blueprint to help institutions engage in the GOALS self-study process
- Create an accreditation blueprint for regional accreditors on web accessibility
- Produce case studies focused on cost analysis of web accessibility
- Increase the number of institutions adopting enterprise-wide web accessibility

CURRENT PARTNERS

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WICHE
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Web Accessibility In Mind

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