

Accessibil-IT: Accessibility for the College, Not the Vendor

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One question colleges struggle with is how to verify if information and communication technology (ICT) products, such as websites or other IT applications, meet accessibility standards.

To support access by students with disabilities and ensure an equal opportunity to participate in the educational setting, colleges should implement a checkpoint during procurement to assess if ICT products are accessible. However, what colleges should not do is become the accessibility evaluation and verification entity for vendors.

Jeff Kline, the Statewide Accessibility Coordinator at the Texas Department of Information Resources and author of “[Strategic IT Accessibility: Enabling the Organization](#)”, recently posted an article on his blog, titled [Throwing Your Organization’s Money Away Or Why Must Your Organization Pay to Test Accessibility of IT Products and Services It Purchases??](#) Kline goes into various details as to why it becomes problematic when an organization purchasing an ICT product becomes the accessibility evaluator for that product.

This often happens in higher education when a new website or web-based application is adopted by a college only to discover there are significant accessibility issues. The typical outcome is the vendor then requests information from the college as to what accessibility issues are present, how to fix these issues, and then to perform additional tests to verify subsequent versions of the product are more accessible.

Scalable Solution Needed

While such an ad hoc response between the college and vendor may be a solution for addressing immediate accessibility issues in the short term, it is an ineffective solution in the long term for adopting accessible ICT products campus-wide. It is also important to note that such a testing process is very beneficial to the vendor as they do not have to make any commitments to accessibility other than to fix what is reported.

Evaluating ICT products for accessibility can involve different combinations of automated tools, manual testing procedures and various assistive technologies. Furthermore, the time in which effective ICT accessibility testing and remediation should be performed is during the development phase of the product — not after it has been deployed to a “production” environment. The college’s investment of time, resources and personnel on such an ad hoc basis is not scalable when viewed in the context of all the ICT products developed, used, maintained or purchased by the institution.

Where to Begin

Colleges should implement procedures to determine the level of accessibility of ICT products as part of an overall procurement process. However, colleges may choose to modify these processes depending on the type of ICT purchase. For example, internal ICT purchases involving common desktop applications or

hardware products for a campus office may undergo a modified accessibility review compared to ICT purchases that affect the entire campus community or involve an RFP process.

A simple ICT accessibility review process could include the following steps:

- Document the departmental/office requirements
- Obtain accessibility documentation from comparable products
- Review the accessibility documentation and ask questions (as appropriate)
- Select the most accessible product that also meets the documented requirements

A more thorough ICT accessibility review process, such as that for a Request for Proposal, could include the following steps:

- Document the institutional requirements
- Inform vendors of the applicable accessibility standards (e.g., Section 508, WCAG 2.0, AA, etc.)
- Obtain documentation, preferably from a third-party accessibility evaluator
- Review the accessibility documentation and **ask questions**
- Request product demonstrations with assistive technology functionality
- Select the most accessible product that also meets the documented requirements
- Include accessibility requirements in the **contract or statement of work**

Accessibility Training Helpful

A significant limitation of the above processes is the need to have a college representative sufficiently familiar with accessibility issues to provide informed feedback. Reviewing accessibility documentation and asking accessibility questions of a product can be challenging for colleges who do not have any staff trained on institutional ICT accessibility topics.

Identifying an individual (or external resource) knowledgeable in accessibility topics can help streamline accessibility review processes for the institution. However, while it is possible college staff may be more involved in reviewing some ICT products over others, institutions should be cautious of becoming the sole source of accessibility support for a vendor.

Have a Defined Review Process

Educating vendors on applicable accessibility standards and establishing expectations regarding access for students with disabilities is often a necessity, yet institutions should avoid becoming the evaluation and testing entity for a vendor. Colleges must recognize the distinction between having an internal accessibility review process and that of becoming the accessibility reviewer for vendors.

Institutions that do not have a defined process for reviewing the level of accessibility of ICT products will often resort to ad hoc processes and create situations that should be avoided from the outset. Reviewing the accessibility of ICT products is necessary to ensure that the opportunity exists for the entire campus community, including students with disabilities, to participate and engage with our instructional and academic resources. Creating that accessibility review process in advance to support the college's efforts can help meet institutional obligations and student expectations.

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