Standards for Accessibility

Postsecondary institutions are obligated to provide accessible learning materials and technologies for students with disabilities. As those institutions increasingly turn to digital course materials, an increased attention should also be given to ensuring accessibility so that all learners have equal opportunities to learn.

Two standards are cited: Section 508 and WCAG 2.0. Section 508 is the earlier standard and is currently being “refreshed” to bring its language up-to-date with the WCAG 2.0 guidelines.

Section 508

Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act, written in 1986, requires federal departments and agencies to “eliminate barriers in information technology, open new opportunities for people with disabilities, and encourage development of technologies that will help achieve these goals,” according to the federal 508 website (<https://www.section508.gov/section508-laws>).

Individuals with disabilities must be guaranteed comparable access to information that others have. While Section 508 was written for Federal agencies to guide how they develop, procure, maintain and use electronic and information technology, many States have also adopted Section 508 standards. To learn more, visit<https://www.section508.gov>.

WCAG 2.0

The international community of the World Wide Consortium (W3C) developed a set of voluntary Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), the most recent version of which is titled [WCAG 2.0](http://www.w3.org/TR/WCAG20/). These consist of 12 broad guidelines categorized under four principles of accessibility:

WCAG 2.0 Principles and Examples of Guidelines

Perceivable

Information and user interface components must be presentable to users in ways they can perceive.

* Provide text alternatives for any non-text content
* Make it easier for users to see and hear content including separating foreground from background.

Operable

User interface components and navigation must be operable.

* Make all functionality available via a keyboard.
* Provide ways to help users navigate, find content, and determine where they are within content.

Understandable

Information and the operation of user interface must be understandable.

* Make text content readable and understandable.
* Make web pages appear and operate in predictable ways.

Robust

Content is robust enough that it can be interpreted reliably by a wide variety of user agents, including assistive technologies.

* Maximize compatibility with current and future user agents, including assistive technologies.

The WAI has also developed “success criteria” to evaluate conformance to each guideline, with three levels of conformance:

* Level A provides for basic accessibility,
* Level AA provides for a more comprehensive level of accessibility, and
* Level AAA provides for maximum accessibility.[26](http://udloncampus.cast.org/page/policy_legal#l1970131-01)

While the WCAG 2.0 applies specifically to web content, the WAI has released [guidance](http://www.w3.org/TR/wcag2ict/) on applying WCAG 2.0 standards to non-web-based information and communication technology—specifically to non-web-based documents and software.

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Additional Information

Over the past several years, an increasing number of complaints have been filed with OCR at the Department of Education and CRD at the Department of Justice regarding the accessibility of technology including web sites on college and university campuses. Many have resulted in voluntary agreements with the university in question to take actions to improve their institutional accessibility policies. Additional resolutions and settlements have occurred as a result of OCR’s pro-active compliance review process as well as efforts by disability advocates.

For more information on these voluntary agreements at postsecondary institutions, visit<http://udloncampus.cast.org/page/policy_legal>

Another helpful resource is a [report](http://aim.cast.org/collaborate/p-s_commission) by the Advisory Commission on Accessible Instructional Materials (AIM) in Postsecondary Education for Students with Disabilities, which was convened under the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008, to address challenges associated with the provision of AIM to students with print disabilities.