



Research Insights About Digital Accessibility

Policy, Practice, and Perception in Higher Education

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Presenter Perspectives



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- Harvard University
- EDUCAUSE – professional association of higher education IT
- International Association of Accessibility Professionals (IAAP)
- Association of Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD)

Perspective: researcher, practitioner, and end user who requires accessible technology

Session Roadmap



Part 1

The Case for Accessibility

Why proactive accessibility matters more than reactive fixes



Part 2

What the Policies Say

An cross-sectional analysis of institutional accessibility policies



Part 3

What Practitioners Report

Survey of 736 higher ed professionals on the state of the field



Part 1

The Case for Embedding Accessibility

Drawing from: The Case for Embedded Digital Accessibility (EDUCAUSE Review, 2026)

Why "Embedded Accessibility"?



Reactive Approach

- Fix barriers only after they are found
- Burdens the person with a disability
- Higher cost of retrofitting
- Inefficient and inconsistent results



Embedded Approach

- Build accessibility in from the start
- "Born accessible" design philosophy
- Lower long-term cost
- Better experience for everyone

The Risk Calculus



Legal Exposure

ADA Title II rule requires WCAG 2.1 AA conformance by April 2026 for most public institutions
§504 & ADA long-required accessible technology, even before the specificity of the newer Rule.



Reputational Harm

OCR investigations, lawsuits, and public complaints signal systemic failures



Missed Inclusion

3.86 million students with disabilities attend U.S. colleges and universities

Making the Case to Leaders

- **Compliance is necessary but insufficient**
- Institutions will not be able to comply without vendor cooperation: Market pressure from explicit requirements helps drive industry change
- Peer networks and professional associations serve as critical diffusion channels for advancing practice
- Accessibility-forward technology is also better prepared for greater automation and AI integrations
- Accessibility aligns with core institutional values: equity, inclusion, and excellence
- Born-accessible technology reduces long-term cost and effort
- State and international entities increasingly require meeting accessibility standards too



Key Takeaway

Know Your Audience

1. Know the audiences you address and the reasons to pursue accessibility that will be *most compelling to them*
2. Design accessible systems and content from the start: Embed, don't' retrofit
3. Collective market pressure on vendors is the single largest lever we have
4. Frame accessibility as institutional value, not just compliance

Part 2

What the Policies Say About Institutional Accessibility

*Drawing from: An Exploratory Analysis of Postsecondary Digital Accessibility Policies
(Shachmut, 2025)*

Dissertation Study Overview

53

institutional policies analyzed

8

U.S. states represented

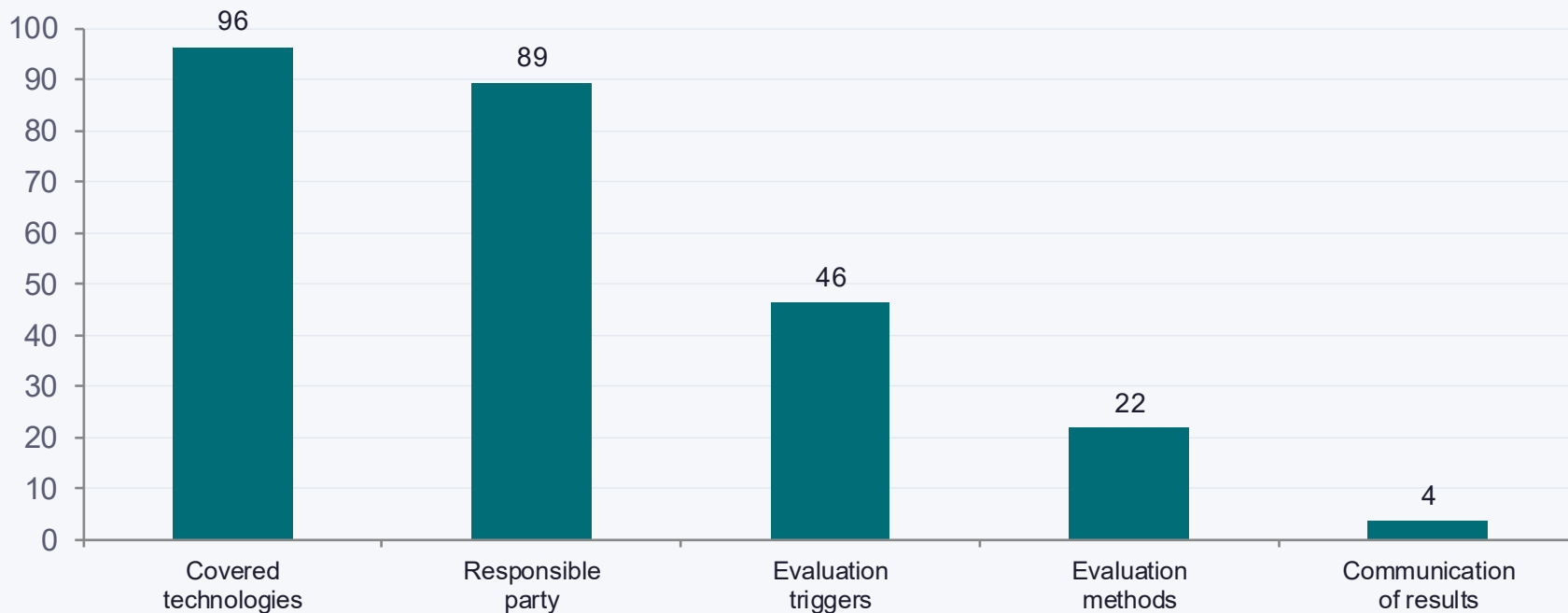
5

Carnegie classifications

Deductive content analysis using quality indicators from Lazar et al. (2015) and predictors from Thompson et al. (2024)

47.2% of sampled institutions had no digital accessibility policy at all

Five Quality Indicators for Policies



Only 1 analyzed policy met all five quality indicator criteria

Source: Shachmut (2025), based on criteria from Lazar, Goldstein, & Taylor (2015).

Tie Policy to Institutional Mission

Only 2

of sampled institutions connected
accessibility to institutional mission

Loyola University Maryland

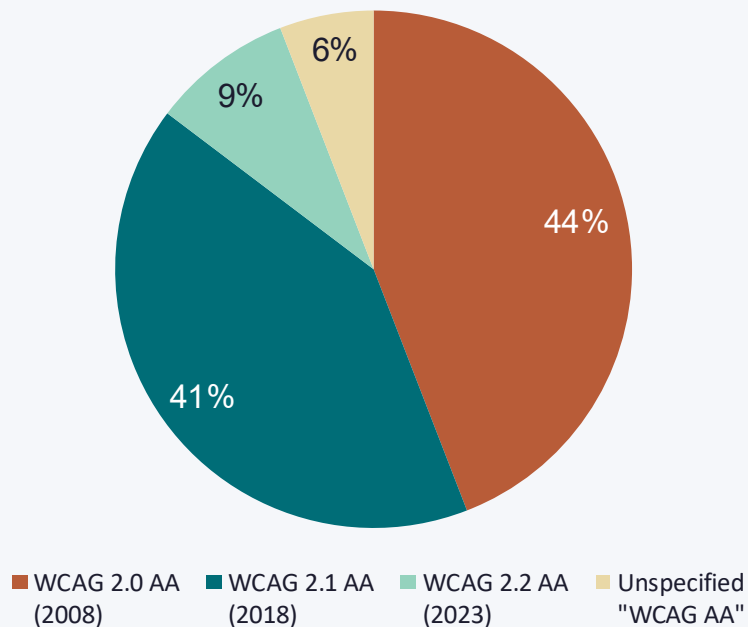
Grounded accessibility work in Jesuit mission of cura personalis — recognizing the fundamental dignity of all human beings

Michigan State University

Connected digital accessibility to core values of collaboration, equity, excellence, integrity, and respect

Most referenced only the ADA or Section 504 — legal framing overwhelmed values-based framing.

Aim for the Right Technical Standard



Two large R1 universities cited a non-existent standard: "WCAG AA" without specifying a version making compliance impossible to validate.

ADA Title II now requires WCAG 2.1 AA. Policies citing older standards need updating.

Training: A Gap in Policy

20.8%

of institutions indicated training is expected in their policies

- Most policies that mentioned training only indicate it is offered—not required
- When training was specified, it typically applied only to web content creators
- No studied policy required training for internal-facing staff
- *Compare: financial compliance, gender equity, and security training are routinely required of all employees*



What Strong Policies Include

1. Name the technologies your policy covers—including built and bought
2. Specify a current, specific technical standard (e.g., WCAG 2.1 or 2.2 AA)
3. Designate responsible parties (by role or office)
4. Define parameters for evaluation and reporting on progress
5. Require training broadly—do not just offer it
6. Tie accessibility to institutional mission and values

Part 3

What Practitioners Report: Survey Research Findings

*Drawing from: Digital Accessibility Innovations Diffusion in Higher Education
(Shachmut & Struble, 2026)*

Survey Study Overview

736

higher education
professionals surveyed

314

key informants, knowledgeable
about institutional efforts

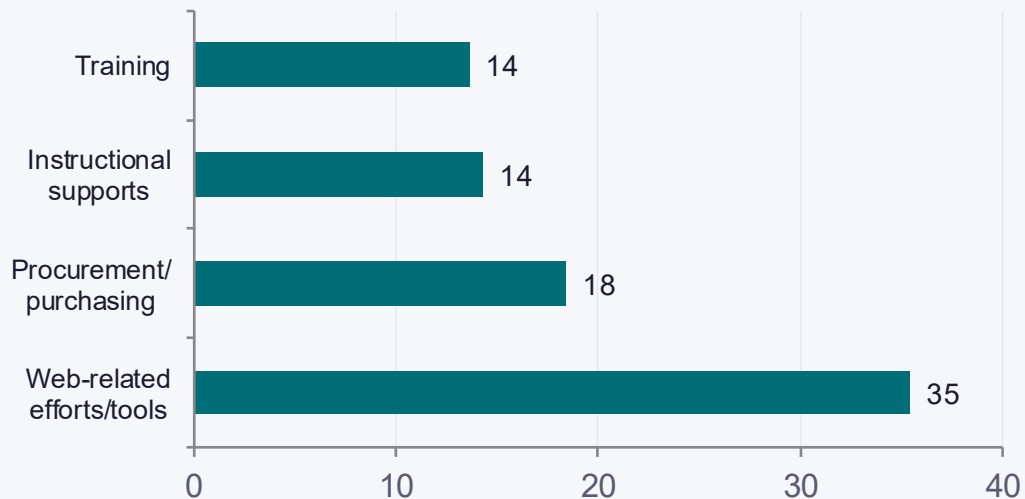
191+

with digital accessibility
as primary responsibility

Conducted with EDUCAUSE Research and promoted across AHEAD and other professional associations. Among the largest surveys conducted within the higher ed digital accessibility profession.

What's Working

Informed professionals identified the most effective areas of practice



72.8%

have a digital accessibility policy

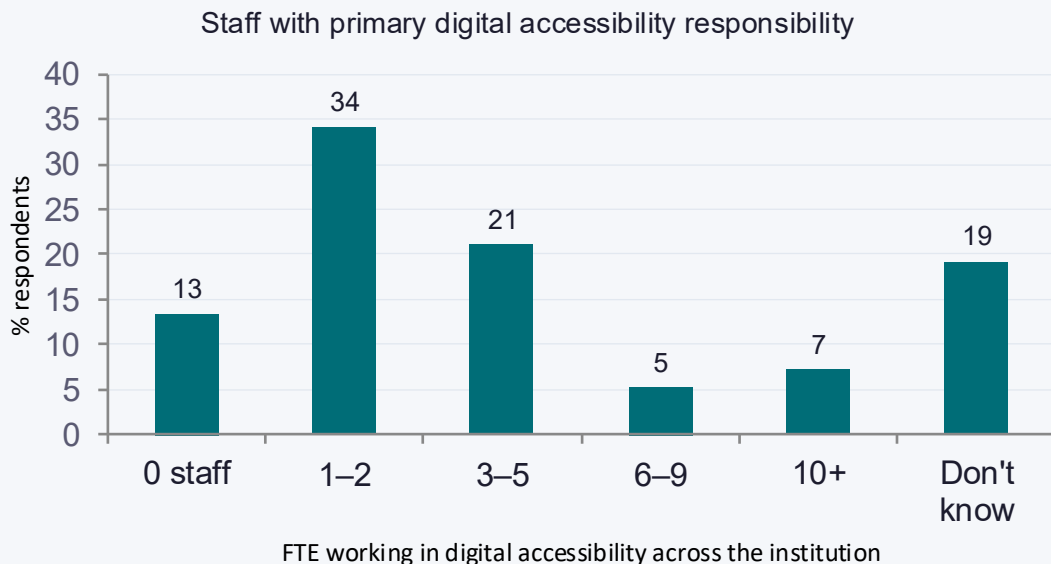
71.5%

offer faculty training

69.9%

offer staff training

Staffing: The Biggest Gap



43.5%

of key informants cited staffing as the resource that would most advance the work

Among policies, the most common designated responsible party for digital accessibility was "no one."

Training: Optional Is the Norm

66.5%

Faculty training
is optional

67.9%

Staff training
is optional

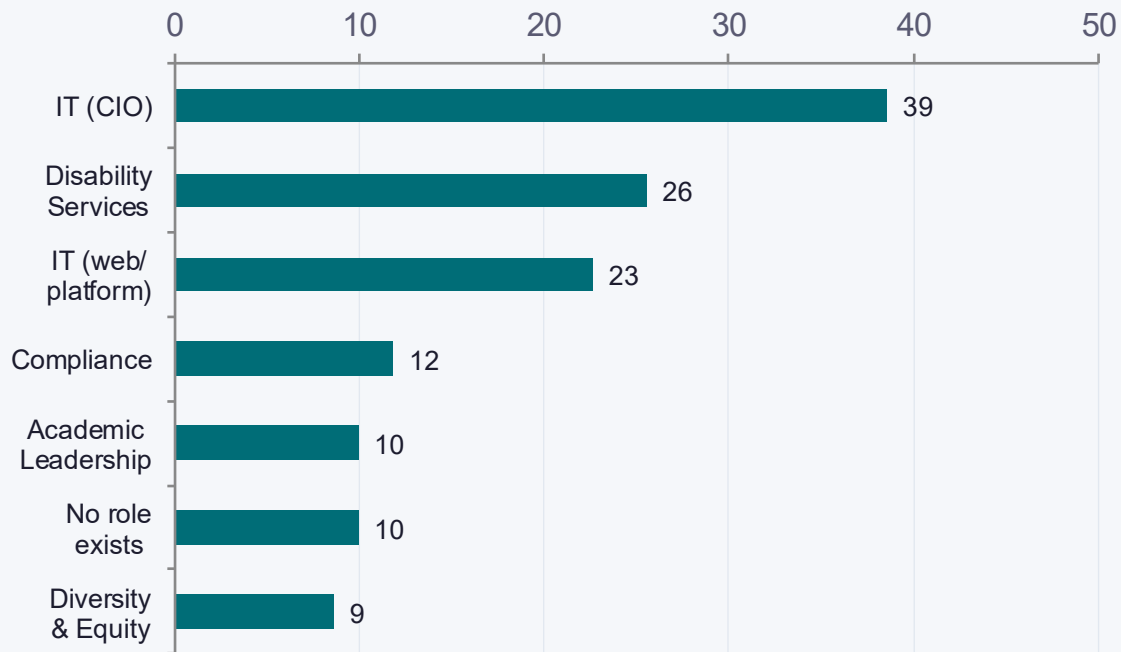
~3.5%

Training always
required

When key informants were asked what would most advance the work:

- **25.9% said more training; of those, 44.7% specifically insisted it be required**

Where Does Accessibility Live?



For the AHEAD community:

Aggregate total for IT units: 72.8%

Disability Services is the 2nd most common organizational home

Reporting lines span 15+ different offices—the ideal structure is still emerging. *The best one is the one most effective for your organization.*

The Leadership Awareness Gap

42.9%

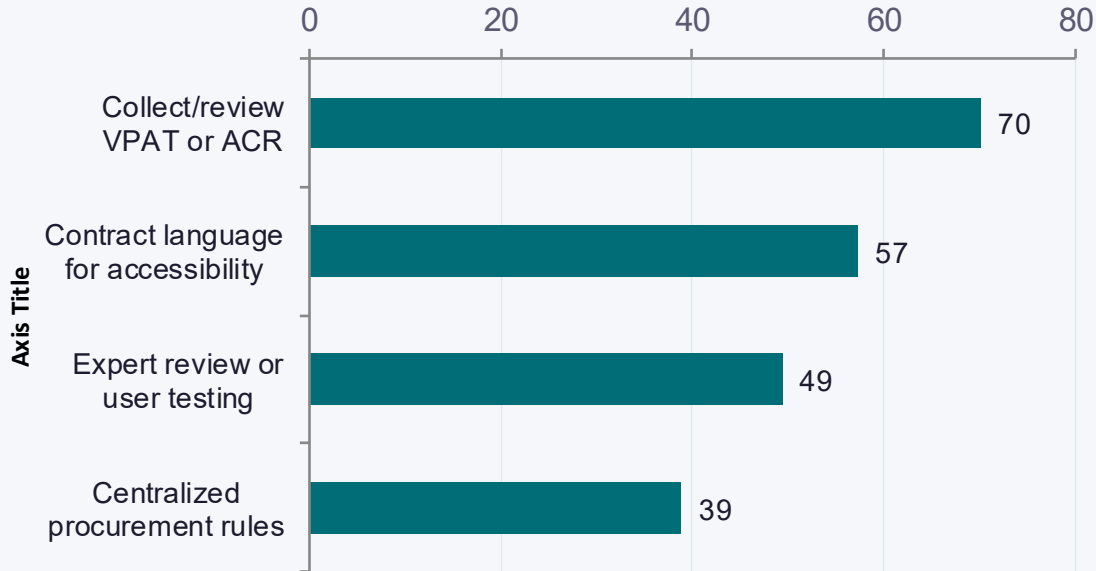
said their institutional leaders were not knowledgeable about digital accessibility

Only 23.5% of university leaders themselves believed their peers were knowledgeable

Institutional Plan awareness varies by role:

- 32% of disability support staff didn't know if a digital accessibility plan existed at their school
- 50% of faculty were unaware

Procurement Practices



Procurement is the biggest lever for systemic change

Collective market pressure on vendors to deliver accessible products will ease institutional burden. Tools like the HECVAT integrate accessibility with security and privacy reviews.

Even the most common methods were used just over half of the time or less.

Connecting the Dots

The Case (Why)

Reactive approaches are insufficient; embedding accessibility proactively reduces cost and risk

The Policies (How)

Most policies are incomplete; mission-driven framing and training requirements are rare

The Practice (What)

Resource gaps in staffing, mandatory training, and leadership awareness hold back progress

Together, we have a clear agenda: embed accessibility from the start, strengthen policies, and invest in the people and training to make it happen.

For Disability & Access Professionals

- You are essential partners!—2nd most common departmental home for digital accessibility work
- Invest in partnerships with critical partner orgs: IT, compliance, purchasing, communications
- Bridge the gap between IT-led efforts and the student experience
(insist on SWD experience voice)
- Advocate for mandatory training for all employees who create or share digital content
- Push for policies that go beyond compliance to reflect institutional mission
- Leverage peer networks (AHEAD, EDUCAUSE) as diffusion channels for best practices

Recommendations for Stakeholders

Practitioners

- Advocate collectively for vendor improvement
- Build cross-unit partnerships
- Use community resources for professional growth
- Build born-accessible authoring into new tools

Leaders

- Tie accessibility to institutional mission & strategic plans
- Create process gates for accessibility
- Mandate training institution-wide
- Invest in dedicated staffing

Researchers

- Study born-accessible models
- Investigate making tools easier to create accessible content
- Examine what drives policy creation
- Investigate non-public-facing content

Leadership Matters

When institutional leaders visibly champion accessibility, it signals that this work is a priority, not an afterthought.

- Leadership engagement is critical for adoption of accessibility practices
- Leaders can champion staffing, mandatory training, and policy development
- Example: Harvard's annual University-wide Accessibility Summit brings together faculty, staff, and senior leaders to celebrate progress and drive inclusion



Leadership Is a Team Sport

Digital accessibility requires senior leaders across the institution — not just one office — to be knowledgeable and active.



Harvard's University Accessibility Committee (UAC)

- Senior leadership-level, cross-School committee under the Provost with ADA Coordinator
- Working groups: digital accessibility, student experience, physical accessibility, and faculty/staff accessibility
- Members implement and advance access at their respective Schools and units as well as collectively
- **Model: embed accessibility leadership across the institution, not just in one team**

Resources



Harvard University Digital Accessibility Services

accessibility.huit.harvard.edu

- Training and support resources for content creators, developers, designers, and purchasers
- Harvard's Digital Accessibility Policy & Procedures
- Guides for authoring content, hosting accessible events, testing, and working with vendors
- WCAG 2.1 Techniques library with filterable guidance and code snippets



Questions & Discussion

Where does your institution stand?

What would make the biggest difference on your campus?

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Thank You

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