Make sure your institution’s online resources meet national standards for accessibility. Use our quick cheat sheet to guide you through the essentials.

There are plenty of reasons your college or university should strive to make its web content as accessible as possible for your students: it’s mandated by law, it creates market opportunity, and most importantly, accessible resources make it possible for all students to participate and excel in higher education settings. But acknowledging the guidelines’ importance and understanding how to achieve them are two very different things.

That’s why we’ve compiled a condensed cheat sheet to help you successfully comply with accessibility guidelines for educational web content. From Section 508 of the U.S. Rehabilitation Act to the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0, here’s what you need to do to provide an inclusive and effective educational experience for students of all abilities.

Achieving compliance with Section 508 has a lot to do with ensuring your website is interoperable with assistive technologies, which range from special hardware to certain web design methods. Schools should be sure that their web content supports the following tools:

**Screen Reader**

Blind internet users will typically use this technology, which reads text-based web content out loud. Because these tools cannot describe content that isn’t text-based, colleges should provide text descriptions for images and animations on their site that screen readers can interpret. This means all images and icons need alt text so that the screen reader can identify them for the user. Some of the most popular screen readers include JAWS from Freedom Scientific and Window-Eyes from GW Micro.

**Magnification Software**

This tool increases the size of a particular portion of a given web page, and while it is designed for users with low vision rather than blindness, it can be used in conjunction with a screen reader. This means that all images need a high enough resolution to expand clearly. Two popular screen magnifiers are ZoomText from Ai Squared and MAGic from Freedom Scientific.

**Keyboard-Navigable Web Pages**

Internet users with physical disabilities like nerve damage, arthritis, or repetitive motion injuries sometimes have limited mobility, making it harder to use a mouse to navigate a web page. Institutions should therefore support software and browsers that allow users to navigate web pages with only their keyboards — for example, by pressing the Tab key to highlight various links on the page in sequential order and pressing the Enter key to open the link.

**Understanding Accessibility Guidelines**

When the Americans with Disabilities Act was passed in 1990, the internet wasn’t a widely accepted means of academic participation. Students with disabilities have thus had to fight for the same kind of opportunities and advantages that online learning has provided for other learners. It wasn’t until 1998 that Congress amended the U.S. Rehabilitation Act to include Section 508, which created standards for the accessibility of electronic and information technology.
Checking for Compliance

Important as it is, Section 508 isn’t the highest standard for web content accessibility, nor is it the one to which colleges and universities are likely to be held in legal proceedings. Students with disabilities are taking their schools to court for failing to provide them with the adequate resources for student success. Schools like Miami University in Ohio, Atlantic Cape Cod Community College, and Harvard University have been hit with accessibility lawsuits by students who demand that schools hold themselves to higher standards than Section 508, like those set by WCAG 2.0.

Ensuring that your information systems and web content meet the highest standards of accessibility is a task that most schools would do well to avoid tackling alone. Colleges and universities should consider adopting some or all of the following methods to both protect themselves from legal action and facilitate the greatest possible learning experience for their differently-abled students.

Accessibility Audit

Consider reaching out to an independent agency to conduct an audit of your information systems regularly, and enact whatever suggestions they make as soon as possible. There are also a number of tools that administrators can use to test new web content for accessibility as it’s developed.

Accessibility Statement

Once the audit is complete, request an accessibility statement from your auditor that outlines how your school is compliant with Section 508, WCAG 2.0, and/or other accessibility standards. A document outlining Section 508 compliance is called a Voluntary Product Assessment Tool — a similar outline for WCAG 2.0 is called a WCAG support statement.

Accessibility Training

Both teachers and administrators should be trained in how to consistently provide accessible lessons and assignments through technology like Learning Management Systems.

Accessible eLearning Content

Educators should look to partner with eLearning content providers that strive to follow the most strenuous accessibility standards.

Hoonuit provides faculty development and staff training that enables educators to offer online courses that are compliant with these rigorous accessibility standards. Additionally, Hoonuit provides eLearning courses on a variety of topics that can be offered directly to your students, including first year success skills and technical training on popular software and platforms. All Hoonuit’s eLearning tools and content are compliant with 508 and WCAG 2.0 and offer educators resources to craft or curate accessible instructional materials.

Interested in learning more about how Hoonuit can help your college or university achieve accessibility compliance? Click here.