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As academic libraries and higher education institutions expand their digital presence, web accessibility has become a critical aspect of equitable service delivery, legal compliance, and inclusive design. Recent regulatory developments, including the U.S. Department of Justice's final Title II rule on web accessibility, underscore the urgency for organizations to adopt sustainable, institution-wide accessibility strategies. This article synthesizes existing research on web accessibility in academic libraries and higher education institutions, with a detailed practice-based case study from Emory Libraries. Drawing on a literature review and an institutional methods framework, the paper examines common accessibility barriers, the limitations of compliance-driven approaches, and the role of governance, training, and accountability in advancing accessible digital ecosystems. This study contributes to a holistic model that integrates evaluation, remediation, staff development, and governance, offering practical insights for organizations preparing for Title II compliance and long-term accessibility maturity.

To cite this article:

Bragg, C. & Lovins, C. (2026). Accountability for Web Accessibility in Academic Libraries: A Case Study of Improving Web Accessibility for Emory Libraries. *International Journal of Librarianship*, 11(2), 24-33, <https://doi.org/10.23974/ijol.2026.vol11.2.590>

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Accountability for Web Accessibility in Academic Libraries: A Case Study of Improving Web Accessibility for Emory Libraries

Colin Bragg and Cari Lovins
Emory University, United States

ABSTRACT

As academic libraries and higher education institutions expand their digital presence, web accessibility has become a critical aspect of equitable service delivery, legal compliance, and inclusive design. Recent regulatory developments, including the U.S. Department of Justice's final Title II rule on web accessibility, underscore the urgency for organizations to adopt sustainable, institution-wide accessibility strategies. This article synthesizes existing research on web accessibility in academic libraries and higher education institutions, with a detailed practice-based case study from Emory Libraries. Drawing on a literature review and an institutional methods framework, the paper examines common accessibility barriers, the limitations of compliance-driven approaches, and the role of governance, training, and accountability in advancing accessible digital ecosystems. This study contributes to a holistic model that integrates evaluation, remediation, staff development, and governance, offering practical insights for organizations preparing for Title II compliance and long-term accessibility maturity.

Keywords: Web Accessibility, Accountability, Academic Libraries

INTRODUCTION

Academic library websites and digital platforms are portals to collections, services, and community interaction. The availability of these digital assets directly influences the capacity of users with disabilities to search, access, and engage with library resources and services. Accessibility has been a goal of libraries for many years, but hurdles remain on academic library websites and digital platforms, including inadequate color contrast, the lack of alternate text, and inaccessible forms and documents.

The release of the US Title II rule by the Department of Justice on web accessibility, and the growing global commitments to providing inclusive digital services, have increased the urgency for libraries and other higher education institutions to move away from ad hoc remediation efforts and toward planned, ongoing accessibility programs. This article answers that need by summarizing literature on web accessibility and showcasing governance, training, and remediation in practice at Emory Libraries. In concert, these perspectives illustrate how university libraries

might operationalize accessibility as a legacy institutional responsibility rather than a one-time compliance task.

LITERATURE REVIEW: WEB ACCESSIBILITY IN LIBRARIES AND HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Legal and Standards Context

Research on web accessibility in academic libraries and higher education institutions has been grounded in legal and technical standards such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act, and the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). Studies have repeatedly demonstrated that WCAG conformance, particularly at the AA level, is the de facto criterion for evaluating web accessibility.

While there is a basic understanding of the legal requirements for web accessibility in libraries and higher education institutions, there are continuing issues in routinely providing accessible websites. In “Private Post-Secondary Library Websites and the ADA,” Bielefeld et al. (2021) present a study of the accessibility compliance of private college library websites and show persistent inequities in ADA conformance across institutions.

The Bielefeld study analyzed library homepages of leading private postsecondary institutions from Money.com’s 2019 list, “The Best Colleges in America.” In particular, 98 unique library websites were assessed at two time points: December 2019 (pre-COVID) and October 2020 (post-COVID), with the WAVE Web Accessibility Evaluation Tool (from WebAIM) used to automatically detect accessibility issues.

Most library homepages had a significant number of accessibility concerns, demonstrating that compliance with accessibility requirements is a widespread problem. For instance, more than 45 websites had issues with contrast, notably between text and background. Moreover, many homepages lacked basic accessibility elements (e.g., alternate language for photos, well-formed form components) that further reduced usability for users who rely on assistive devices. Longitudinal studies show support that severe disruptions, such as the rapid move to online services during the COVID-19 pandemic, have not consistently resulted in meaningful accessibility improvements. These findings suggest the limitations of reactive or crisis-based repair.

Design with an Accessibility Mind-Set

A key topic in the web accessibility literature is that web accessibility is most effective when integrated into the earliest stages of digital design, rather than retroactively fixed through remediation. The post-construction evaluation and remediation efforts typically do not provide substantial or permanent gains. We need to begin embedding accessibility into design and development workflows. Likewise, research studies of academic library websites have shown that numerous accessibility barriers (e.g., poor color contrast, missing alternative text, unlabeled form controls, and inaccessible navigation structures) are not one-off technical errors but design decisions made without accessibility as a central requirement (Bielefeld et al., 2021).

These concerns are valid even for well-resourced institutions. Automated audits of library websites reveal that fixing things is not sufficient to overcome systemic accessibility deficiencies. Many of these errors are very easy and inexpensive to fix during the design and initial implementation stages. This study also highlights that repair attempts after launch are typically uneven, inadequate, or deprioritized, underscoring the argument for building accessibility into design workflows upstream rather than as a downstream corrective activity (Bielefield et al., 2021).

Brunk and Ireton (2022) echo this line of reasoning by contextualizing accessibility challenges within broader institutional and cultural contexts. When accessibility is an afterthought in the website building process, they argue, duty is diluted, and accountability is obfuscated. Conversely, it is vital to incorporate accessibility into the design process through explicit job assignments, inclusive UX techniques, and early testing with assistive devices. This gives clear ownership and removes the need for reactive changes. Their case study shows how advocacy and users' perspectives in design-stage decisions might help to prevent whole classes of accessibility problems from arising in the first place.

Professional landscape reviews typically reflect the constraints of remediation-first strategies. Retrofitting inaccessible digital assets is an expensive and resource-intensive process that may be difficult to sustain at scale. This is especially true in contexts where content is developed in a decentralized way and is constantly being updated, as detailed in The American Library Association's "Accessibility in Libraries: A Landscape Review" (2022). The research is in keeping with universal design principles, which indicate that planning and design efforts should anticipate the diverse needs of users to reduce remediation costs and improve usability for all users, including those with temporary or situational limitations.

Remediation generally involves correcting specific problems identified through automated or manual audits. Accessibility-first design makes conscious choices at the outset about information architecture, content organization, graphic design, and interaction patterns. Libraries created with accessibility from the ground up will be better positioned to reduce ongoing maintenance costs, mitigate legal and reputational risk, and provide more uniform user experiences across platforms and content types.

These studies show that libraries trying to be digitally accessible, especially given shifting statutory demands like those currently imposed in the United States, must incorporate accessibility into the very design of their programs and services, not only as an afterthought to their compliance with the Department of Justice's Title II rule. This requires not only the technical understanding of standards such as WCAG, but also governance, training, and institutional cultures to support accessibility as a core aspect of digital service design.

Accountability, Governance, and Culture

Organizational structural and cultural impediments, as well as technical deficits, are also hampering advances in accessibility. Vague ownership and dispersed responsibilities regarding website accessibility often make accessibility an afterthought. The significance of assigning accountable responsibilities, integrating accessibility from the start of project lifecycles, and engaging people with disabilities in evaluation and testing cannot be overemphasized. Often, websites are developed without initially considering the needs of the different audiences with disabilities.

Angela Kae Jackson (2023) published a PhD dissertation that investigated organizational methods of digital accessibility in higher education institutions and concluded that organizational approaches to digital accessibility are generally reactive rather than proactive. The dissertation examined the findings from interviews with 14 practitioners across a variety of higher education institutions. The primary conclusions of the research are described by four overarching topics for integrating digital accessibility across higher education institutions: people, practices, policies, and planning. Outside of these issues, the dissertation highlighted that most institutions are often motivated by risk management and compliance.

For example, Jackson described the efforts of a higher education institution, known as IHE1, following a 2018 investigation by the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights into suspected violations of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, including inaccessible websites and online programs. In response to the investigation, the higher education institution took a number of significant corrective actions, including creating a 14-member Digital Accessibility Committee (DAC) in 2019 with wide representation across students, faculty, academic leadership, and administrators; creating a university-wide digital accessibility policy that set minimum standards for the procurement of digital content and software; and hiring a dedicated digital accessibility coordinator in 2020 to monitor and report on centralized, coordinated efforts across schools and colleges (Jackson, 2023).

Similarly, the article by Brunk and Ireton (2022), “Failures in Library Website Accessibility: A Problem of Accountability,” suggests that accessibility should be a top organizational concern and that at least one person be assigned accountability for ensuring that accessible criteria are met. Ideally, this person would be responsible for raising awareness of accessibility and advocating for people with disabilities.

A good way to assign responsibility for digital accessibility is to articulate roles in job descriptions and provide people with the authority and support to meet accessibility criteria. Resource limits are commonly cited as a hurdle, though the main barriers are often related to coordination, role clarity, and competing institutional agendas rather than the budget alone.

A PRACTICE-BASED CASE STUDY AT EMORY LIBRARIES

This practice-based case study of Emory Libraries’ approach to website accessibility focuses on governance structures, training curricula, and remediation workflows developed during 2018–2026. While Emory University is not legally obligated to follow the U.S. Department of Justice’s Title II accessibility requirements for public entities, Emory Libraries deliberately used these requirements as a guide to help craft training efforts and a coordinated remediation plan to enhance the accessibility of its web presence.

Governance Model and Roles

Emory Libraries adopted a distributed governance model that spreads responsibility for web content to defined roles following a significant website redesign. Each division and library was assigned a Content Czar to monitor sections of the Emory Libraries website, including the websites of a specific library or division. Also, Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) were identified to help Content Czars manage specific websites. With senior leadership support, a formal Web Content

Governance Group was established and linked to broader content strategy and branding efforts. The hybrid paradigm allows departments to remain independent while benefiting from centralized coordination. A web content strategist position was created to guarantee web content standards were met across the organization. This position oversees all web content for Emory Libraries and serves as the web program manager (a product owner role) in the Emory Libraries technology division. The Web Content Strategist is responsible for leading the governance group, managing the generation of pages, prioritizing enhancement requests, and overseeing quality assurance testing. Monthly meetings of the content governance group ensure openness and engagement with Content Czars and SMEs.

While the governance model has matured since its inception, there are problems and gaps, including formalizing the responsibility of providing accessible digital content for Emory Libraries. In early conversations with Content Czars and SMEs, the need for formal training on web accessibility guidelines emerged as a primary requirement.

Web Accessibility Training and Curriculum

To build institutional capacity for developing and managing accessible website content, Emory Libraries developed a multi-course accessibility curriculum for the Content Czars and SMEs. The curriculum introduces foundational concepts aligned with WCAG 2.1 AA standards and is designed to help participants understand and apply digital accessibility principles in their daily work.

The first four courses in the curriculum focused on accessibility laws, standards, evaluation methods, and practical application:

Course 1 – Baseline Learning: The Basics of Web Accessibility

This introductory session covers the fundamentals of web accessibility, including its importance for usability and inclusion, and is designed for those with minimal experience in accessibility. It explores different types of disabilities—permanent, temporary, and age-related—and introduces key principles, guidelines, and legal frameworks such as Section 508. Participants are introduced to essential accessibility roles and resources, including the International Association of Accessibility Professionals (IAAP) certification. The session concludes with practical guidance on common issues, with a focus on alternative text and keyboard navigation.

Course 2 – Accessibility Guidelines, Criteria, Conformance, Low-Hanging Fruit

This session provides a deeper look at the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) and W3C processes. It explains success criteria, conformance levels, and the four core principles: Perceivable, Operable, Understandable, and Robust. The session includes practical strategies for improving accessibility in Site Studio/Drupal, addressing headings, text alternatives, color contrast, and link text. Emphasis is placed on identifying “low-hanging fruit”—high-impact, low-effort improvements.

Course 3 – Accessibility Assessments

Participants learn how to evaluate web accessibility using both automated and manual testing techniques. The session introduces key tools and methodologies for identifying issues and

prioritizing remediation. Hands-on exercises and assigned practice encourage participants to assess their own sites, followed by a quiz to reinforce concepts from earlier sessions.

Course 4 – Repair and Reset

This session addresses interpreting assessment results and planning effective remediation. Topics include content fixes, bug resolution, enhancement requests, and strategies for sustaining accessibility in future projects. Emphasis is placed on applying lessons learned to strengthen accessibility across digital platforms.

The initial set of accessibility training courses launched in February 2025. Each session was one hour long, delivered monthly via Zoom, and recorded to support asynchronous access. While participation was not mandatory, attendance was strongly encouraged, as all Content Czars and SMEs were expected to create and maintain accessible web content moving forward. To reinforce learning and support practical application, open office hours were held between sessions to address questions, provide individualized guidance, and assist with remediation of content.

Attendance data indicated that approximately 50% of Content Czars and SMEs participated in the live sessions, with most attendees representing Content Czars who hold primary responsibility for managing web content within their respective divisions or libraries. At the time of this study, reliable data on engagement with the recorded sessions was not available, limiting a full assessment of overall participation.

To address these gaps, future iterations of the training program will incorporate more robust data collection and assessment strategies. Recordings from the initial course series will be integrated into the onboarding process for new members of the Web Content Governance group to ensure a consistent baseline of knowledge. In addition, mechanisms will be implemented to track both live and asynchronous participation, including confirmation of attendance or recording views. Participant feedback will also be systematically collected to evaluate the effectiveness and applicability of the training and identify areas for improvement.

Testing and Remediation Framework

The testing and remediation strategy integrates automated and manual testing, along with content remediation and technical (Drupal) remediation. The Content Czars and Web Content Strategist are responsible for conducting automated and manual tests on their web pages or websites, noting any issues discovered during testing, and then remediating any accessibility issues with the content.

The initial phase of this effort included the Content Czars testing approximately 700 pages using Lighthouse, which is an open-source, automated tool developed by Google that analyzes web pages for performance, accessibility, SEO, and best practices. The manual testing phase will begin after remediation of issues identified by the automated tests. The manual testing includes keyboard navigation, screen reader compatibility, and mobile accessibility assessments. This dual approach addresses known limitations of automated tools and aligns with known WCAG standards.

All test results are documented in shared repositories and tracking matrices, which capture test scores, identified issues, remediation actions, and verification status. This documentation

provides evidence of good-faith remediation efforts and supports transparency and accountability with efforts towards web accessibility compliance.

The Content Czars and SMEs assumed responsibility for remedying all content issues, including alternative text descriptions. The technical fixes, which include large-scale changes within the Drupal Content Management System, are prioritized, beginning with the easier “low-hanging fruit.” Once remediation from the automated tests is complete, the cycle will begin again with manual testing and any further remediation. Initial phases focus on library-managed web content, with future expansion planned for applications, repositories, and embedded media.

Future Evaluation Framework

While the initial objectives for Emory Libraries’ website accessibility project focused on building governance structures, training, and repair routines, the project also underscored the need to include evaluation measures in accessibility initiatives from the outset.

Early indications of engagement with Content Czars and SMEs came from participation data, such as attendance at live training sessions and participation in office hours. Reviews of remediated content indicated better consistency of accessibility practices resulting from the training. For example, a Lighthouse accessibility score of 90 or higher was established as a benchmark for Content Czars and SMEs undertaking website accessibility remediation. The initial scores from the Lighthouse tests were recorded in a matrix and will be compared with revised scores once all remediations are complete.

Future phases of the program will incorporate additional intentional evaluation strategies, including periodic accessibility audits, participant feedback mechanisms, asynchronous training analytics, and continual assessment of common accessibility errors, to enable continuous improvement and organizational accessibility maturity.

DISCUSSION

The Emory Libraries case study reinforces the need for accountability, governance, continuous improvement, and the establishment of a culture of accessibility. Although initial steps were taken following the Emory Libraries website redesign to establish a governance model, substantial work remains to be done on accountability and culture.

While Content Czars and SMEs play a critical role in maintaining web content, these responsibilities are generally not part of their primary job functions. Instead, they are often assumed on top of existing duties, which can affect the consistency and sustainability of web accessibility efforts. Although the Web Content Strategist can be seen as the point of contact for ensuring web accessibility standards are met, this role does not have functional authority. Instead, this role carries governance and convening authority, enabling them to set direction, establish priorities, and guide decision-making processes.

This case also illustrates how regulatory deadlines can serve as catalysts for institutional change, prompting alignment between policy, practice, and values. However, long-term success

depends on embedding accessibility into job roles, procurement processes, and project governance frameworks.

For libraries and higher education institutions preparing for Title II compliance and broader accessibility commitments, this study offers several implications:

- Accessibility must be governed, not delegated informally.
- Training programs should be role-based and iterative.
- Automated testing must be complemented by manual tests to ensure all accessibility requirements are met. Ideally, the tests would involve gathering feedback from individuals with disabilities who interact with the websites.
- Ongoing evaluation and continuous improvement processes must be built into the journey from the start.
- Documentation is essential for accountability and continuous improvement.
- Accessibility should be treated as a quality core service, not a technical add-on.

CONCLUSION

Making web accessibility a reality in libraries and higher education institutions takes more than just finding and fixing individual technological issues. As evidenced by the research and the Emory Libraries case study, sustained access is best realized through conscious planning, institutional governance, and a shared commitment to inclusive design techniques embedded early in the digital development process. Initial accessibility testing of Emory Libraries' websites identified recurring difficulties, many of which may be attributed to common content-generation methods or general design choices, such as incorrect heading structures, missing alternate text, and insufficient color contrast. In response, focused training sessions were created and provided to content contributors on accessibility content requirements and practical ways to incorporate these practices into day-to-day workflows. It is expected that, as a result of these efforts, further reviews will reveal tangible improvement in the consistency and quality of the accessible content, particularly in areas directly targeted through training. However, the time and effort necessary to discover, correct, and authenticate existing content illustrated the resource-intensive nature of retroactive accessibility work. Although remediation is still necessary, especially for legacy systems and content, the case study shows that accessibility work is more sustainable, scalable, and effective when built into design, content creation, and decision-making from the outset rather than remediated after the fact.

The Emory Libraries case demonstrates that governance frameworks, role-based training, and documented evaluation and repair workflows support the transition of accessibility from an informal or individual responsibility to an institutional practice. Libraries can lay the groundwork for ongoing development by defining roles, strengthening staff capacity, and incorporating both automated and human testing into regular operations. This approach re-conceives accessibility not as a niche technical issue but as a key aspect of digital service quality, usefulness, and fairness.

Regulatory changes such as the U.S. Department of Justice's Title II rule merely highlight the urgency of this transformation. But the implication is not only compliance. Organizations that

implement accessibility-first practices are well-poised to lower long-term maintenance costs, avoid legal and reputational issues, and provide a more consistent and inclusive user experience across platforms. Integrating accessibility into governance, procurement, project planning, and content strategy also helps match institutional values with demonstrable outcomes.

Digital accessibility is not a destination but a continuous process. By bringing accessibility upstream into design, governance, and culture, libraries and higher education organizations can better fulfill their goal to provide equitable access to information and services for all users.

Disclosure: During the preparation of this article, the authors used ChatGPT and Grammarly to refine the writing process, including improving clarity and readability. After using the tools, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed to ensure their ideas, research, and final voices remained their own.

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About the authors

Colin Bragg is the lead web content strategist for Emory Libraries. As chief product owner for the websites, he develops a comprehensive program roadmap in collaboration with Library Technology, Digital Strategies, and Marketing and Engagement team leaders. Colin's role includes fostering a collaborative environment to support Emory Libraries digital initiatives.

Cari Lovins is a librarian and IT leader who leads a team responsible for project, program, and technology support and training for Emory Libraries. Her work spans technology strategy, change management, and staff development, emphasizing coaching and mentoring teams to deliver sustainable, user-centered digital services across academic research library environments.