Ten recipes for leveraging ADA Title II compliance for more accessible higher education

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Positionality

- I am a researcher, teacher, teacher educator, administrator (Associate Dean for Academics).
- I am a community organizer and sometimes activist, mostly for educational justice and trans rights. In academia, I'm a change-from-within institutionalist.
- I do not identify as disabled (yet). My experience with disability is situational and relational, stemming from my own temporary illness and injury and having family members who identify as disabled (mobility, chronic illness).
- I come to this talk as an engaged and informed ally, always learning, and biased toward collective action.

Bona fides

- Since 2012, I've organized **K-12 CS education advocacy** efforts in Washington state, centering disability justice and justice more broadly in the state's learning standards and funding.
- Since 2015, I've been an **AccessComputing co-PI**, focused on broadening participation by students with disabilities in computing.
- Since 2017, I've studied **teaching about accessibility in CS**, identifying and methods for teacher learning, and co-editing the *Teaching Accessible Computing* book (https://bookish.press/tac).
- Since 2022, I've studied **accessible educational programming languages** in community with teachers and youth with disabilities.

This talk

I was low on prep time this fall due to the federal chaos and my administrative role. What I've prepared is a set of **10 recipes** I've learned for advocating for accessible education at the University of Washington, and our Information School, using the Title II compliance requirement as leverage.

I'll share these briefly, working from the **top of power down to the ground**. After, let's discuss them and your own experiences, and see what knowledge we can build together.

1. Value alignment is most of the work

UW is a university that cares deeply and genuinely about equity, and acknowledges when it fumbles. That has meant that most of our work to advocate internally gets an audience and action. Mistakes still arise constantly, as they do in any bureaucracy, but values keep things moving forward. This makes accessibility work wanted and sometimes resourced.

Recipe: ***restating and recommit to values****.*

2. Administrators are broadly unfamiliar with disability justice

e.g., I am the sole faculty member on an IT committee deciding what compliance will mean at UW. I used the phrase "*nothing about us without us*", asking why we had no students with disabilities sitting on the committee. They had not thought of having students, and were unfamiliar with the very idea, but acted once they realized it was in alignment with institutional values.

Recipe: ***educate in context to change the work****.*

3. Cost narrows conceptions of accessibility to the scalable

Accessibility verification tools check only a fraction of WCAG 2.1 Level AA, but since there is no money to hire people to verify the rest of it, compliance has been conceived as whatever score a tool gives. That leaves many inaccessible, non-compliant experiences invisible unless students report them.

*Recipe: **formalize and document tool limitations** in university policies, standards, and processes*.

4. Procurement is power

Perhaps the strongest center of power I've found is our central university procurement teams: they set the terms and expectations of contracts, and especially in larger coalitions (e.g., Big10), have the power to rapidly and significantly shift vendor product roadmaps toward accessibility.

*Recipe: apply **upward pressure** on IT to change the world.*

5. Job descriptions structure and constrain action

Whether it is someone's job — and whether anyone things it is their job — is a fundamental determinant of how, when, and whether any institutional change is possible. e.g., our accessibility coordinator's job is "compliance", and so even though the institution's value goes beyond compliance, she fears going beyond her role. Empowering her to advocate required advocating to her supervisor to broaden her scope.

Recipe: transform ***job descriptions to empower organizational allies.***

6. Everyone is a teacher, every place is a classroom

Yes, faculty, but also PhD students, undergraduate and masters TAs, temporary lecturers, staff who occasionally take instructional roles, staff who don't teach, but who maintain student-facing learning resources, staff who are conducting accessibility trainings. All of these audiences need accessibility learning contexts and teachers of their own.

*Recipe: **build learning communities** to grow capacity, and don't limit them to classroom spaces.*

7. Accessibility is bounded by weak faculty accountability

Especially post-tenure, the ability for an academic unit leader to hold faculty accountable for anything, let alone inaccessible courses, is weak. This is by design — academic freedom is necessarily broad — but it limits the extent to which disinterested or bad actors will act.

Recipe: ***embed accessibility into merit review and promotion****, creating new levers for accountability.*

8. Advocacy and allyship can be routinized

We built a Canvas plugin that makes it easy for students to report inaccessible content in context. It routes to our teaching and learning staff, they triage, and either route to the instructor, me, or themselves if it's a hard problem. The student doesn't do the work here — the backend process is where the action is, as a kind of proceduralized allyship on behalf of students.

Recipe: ***build advocacy into the infrastructure*** of student experience and backend management.

9. Accessibility moves at the pace of self-advocacy

Because accessibility is mostly invisible to tools, process on accessibility still depends mostly on students self-advocating. Because so many students with disabilities silence themselves due to stigma, there is an agency institutions have over how much they encourage accessibility reporting, and therefore how much accessibility labor the institution has to do.

*Recipe: **mobilize students** to either protest or partner with leadership to find viable timelines for change.*

10. Students with disabilities still opt out

Despite all of this work, many students with disabilities don't even consider college, assuming that it won't work for them. (And rightfully, because it largely hasn't). We're learning the long term equity work will be sharing the good work we are doing, to rebuild trust with students and families that this institution can meet them where they are at, and empower them to become future leaders to make the rest of the world be better too.

Recipe: ***plan long term communication and trust building*** *with communities to transform who shows up in colleges.*

Just a snapshot

I’m sure there are many other lessons I’m forgetting.

I’m sure some of these don’t apply to your contexts, because your organizations have different values or needs.

And I’m sure there are many lessons you’re learning that I’d love to learn!

Discuss!

1. Value alignment is most of the work
2. Administrators are unfamiliar with disability justice
3. Cost narrows conceptions of accessibility to the scalable
4. Procurement is power
5. Job descriptions structure and constrain action
6. Everyone is a teacher, every place is a classroom
7. Accessibility is bounded by weak faculty accountability
8. Advocacy and allyship can be routinized
9. Accessibility moves at the pace of self-advocacy
10. Students with disabilities still opt out