Accredibility: Using Your Web Accessibility Efforts As Evidence During Reaffirmation

In addition to creating resources that institutions can use to assess, plan for, and improve their web accessibility, the staff members of Project GOALS are committed to finding ways to make the most of your institutional accessibility efforts.

One way that institutions can capitalize on their work is to include digital accessibility as part of reaffirmation efforts with their regional accrediting body. The ways this can be done are as varied as the accrediting agencies and their constituent institutions. However, GOALS staff has completed an analysis of the Principles, Standards and Criteria of the six regional accreditation commissions that oversee higher education in the United States. We hope this information is helpful as you plan to include web accessibility into your accreditation or reaffirmation efforts.

Regional Accreditation Commissions:

- Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools – Commission on Higher Education (MSC) – http://www.msche.org/
- Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU) – http://www.nwccu.org
- Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) – http://www.sacscoc.org/
- Western Association of Schools and Colleges – Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities (WASC) – http://www.wascsenior.org

Web accessibility maps onto the existing requirements for all of the accrediting agencies. So it may be a straightforward proposition that institutional efforts to improve web accessibility can be used to provide either compliance or evidence of continuous quality improvement during reaffirmation. Several broad themes emerged as potential venues for inculcating web accessibility into the accreditation process. While not an exhaustive listing, and bearing in mind that each institution will need to adapt the themes to their own situations, we have created a document highlighting several of these themes and providing information on how they relate to web accessibility efforts. The document is Mapping Accessibility onto Existing Accreditation Standards and Criteria.

In addition to the standards, criteria or principles provided by the Regional Accrediting Commission, web accessibility efforts may also serve as one aspect of an institution’s quality improvement plans. While quality enhancement work generally focuses on student outcomes, many of these plans lend themselves quite handily to the inclusion of students with disabilities. GOALS staff recently conducted a thematic analysis of the QEPs (Quality Enhancement Plans) for project partner SACSCOC’s constituent institutions over the past two years. Over 160 QEPs were posted. The following is a breakdown of some of the major themes found in these plans.

- Reading/Writing/Literacy/Oral Skills/Information Literacy (50)
- Critical Thinking/Contextual Learning/Active Learning (44)
- Remediation (22)
- Freshman Experience (20)
- Diversity/Ethics/Values/Globalization (19)
- Math (16)
- Teamwork/Collaboration (9)
- Technology (8)
- Student Scholarship (7)
- Real World Training/Career/Professionalism (6)
- Academic Advising/Mentoring (6)
- Access to JIT materials (3)
- Student Retention/Completion (2)

While some of these themes are an obvious fit (Diversity, Technology, Ethics, Remediation etc…) many others can also benefit from including digital accessibility as part of the plan. For example, when considering the Freshman Experience, you should consider all of your students. How can an institution promote literacy if materials are in a format that is inaccessible to a portion of your population? If you are hoping to encourage critical thinking and active learning, it is important to make sure that the materials you are using promote learning for all students (e.g., how “active” can learning be if the student is not able to participate due to accessibility issues; and how does this translate to the professional world where excluding those with disabilities runs afoul of anti-discrimination laws?

Each institution is different and will need to find its own path when including web accessibility in work with their regional accreditation commission. However, promoting an environment of inclusiveness is not only the right thing to do, but it can also provide your institution with valuable evidence while building the case for reaffirmation.

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