

# Write Off No One

## CSU's Accessible Technology Initiative Sets Aggressive Guidelines for Ensuring Accessibility in Web Sites and Instructional Materials

*Deborah Kaplan*

**W**ith 23 campuses, 450,000 students and 46,000 faculty and staff, the California State University system is the largest public four-year institution for higher learning in the country. To connect the vast number of people in the University system, CSU recognizes the relevance of the Internet in delivering information and providing services. Additionally, the University emphasizes the value of effective instructional materials for teaching and communicating with students.

In January 2006, CSU launched an Accessible Technology Initiative (ATI) to ensure that information and technology resources are accessible to persons with disabilities in compliance with federal and state mandates such as the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and California State Government Code 11135 which applies Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act as amended in 1998 to state entities and to the CSU. Section 508 details 16 standards for Web developers to follow, including adding alternate tags to the source code for any non-text content (graphics), synchronized equivalent alternatives for multimedia presentations and appropriate uses of color and contrast. The ATI project began under the directorship of Mary Cheng.

Under the Accessible Technology Initiative, CSU strives to find scalable solutions to help implement Web accessibility, instructional materials accessibility and procurement of accessible information technology. The Accessible Technology Initiative reflects CSU's commitment to provide equal access to information resources and technologies to all CSU students, faculty, staff and the general public regardless of disability.



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### **The Business Problem**

CSU knew that as a large, highly-visible university system, it is critical for its Web sites and instructional materials to comply with federal and state mandates for accessibility. But perhaps more important to CSU is its commitment to provide the most effective learning environment for all students.

By having Web sites and instructional materials that are accessible, CSU leaders knew that more students, faculty and staff with disabilities would be able to easily access the same information and resources as others without disabilities. Before establishing the ATI, some CSU campuses were already proactively taking steps to ensure Web site accessibility, but each of those campuses was using different solutions for testing and monitoring its Web sites.

The dynamic nature of the Web and the continuous updating of content made it necessary for CSU to establish a process that can be facilitated by the use of an enterprise-wide Web evaluation and monitoring tool, along with well-defined campus policy and implementation procedures. With 23 diverse campuses

across the state of California, perhaps one of CSU's greatest challenges was to effectively communicate the goals of the project to faculty, staff and students.

### **The Solution**

Once CSU established the ATI, the University selected automated solutions from HiSoftware ([www.hisoftware.com](http://www.hisoftware.com)) to check campus Web sites. The ATI's six-year plan calls for a phased-in implementation with specific milestones for each of the three priorities of Web accessibility, instructional materials accessibility and procurement of accessible information technology. And, while the Web accessibility portion of the initiative is scheduled for completion in 2012, Kaplan stressed that the project will be ongoing.

Because Web content is constantly being updated and new sites are being created on a regular basis, this is a project that will never truly be completed. Instead, CSU views this initiative as a way to monitor and maintain every university Web site for accessibility compliance on an ongoing basis until 2012 and beyond.

The first milestone set for the ATI was to establish effective communication for all

parties involved in carrying out the initiative. To accomplish this, the president of each campus wrote a memo earlier this year introducing the initiative, goals and outcomes. CSU has also established several means of continued communication of the projects' goals and ongoing results, including Communities of Practice (CoP) teleconferences, Listserves, a Blackboard site for internal communication and an ATI Web site for external-facing information.

### **Web Accessibility Implementation Plan**

The ATI's Web Accessibility Implementation Plan includes the following elements to take place during the project's first year:

- A process for auditing, monitoring and remediation of Web sites;
- A process for establishing accountability and documentation procedures;
- A strategy to ensure that new Web sites and Web content incorporate accessibility in the design and authoring process;

- A process for determining exceptions and for developing, documenting and communicating the equally effective alternate form of access that will be provided;
- A process for identifying critical administrative Web sites that require remediation;
- A process for providing alternative ways of delivering information during any period in which Web sites are undergoing retrofitting;
- A training plan for those who develop and maintain Web sites and who author Web content;
- A communication plan to educate the campus about Web accessibility requirements;
- An evaluation process to measure the effectiveness of the plan;
- The identification of roles and responsibilities associated with the above processes;
- Milestones and timelines established at specific dates.

During the first stage of assessment, each campus is required to test a small portion of its Web site using HiSoftware's automated tools. A manual evaluation process is then used to look at this sample of URLs to determine what accessibility errors exist, and a report is generated to develop a plan for remediation. This first year project is established to provide a guide to assist campuses in conducting a self-evaluation of each full Web site's accessibility and to determine how any issues are going to be repaired.

The ATI identifies the urgency of each accessibility issue found in a Web site with the following tags:

- "Must repair" signifies that an issue must be fixed immediately in order to comply with Section 508 guidelines;
- "Best practice" indicates that questions and comments should be applied in new construction where development tools and skills permit;
- Questions not prefaced either way must be applied in new construction and may be applied to older sites if practical, but are not identified as immediate fixes.

Some accessibility issues that fall within the "must repair" category include making sure the text of each link describes where the link goes, checking for links with the same text that point to different places, providing equivalent alt-text for all images that convey content, ensuring HTML event handlers are accessible to both mouse and keyboard users, and various coding used in tables, forms and plug-ins are supported for accessibility.



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### **Instructional Materials Accessibility Plan**

CSU's Instructional Materials Accessibility Plan considers communication through instructional materials to be equally effective for persons with disabilities when it is comparable in quality to those received by students without disabilities, comparable in timeliness of delivery and availability, and provided in a manner and medium appropriate to the significance of the message and the abilities of the person receiving the material.

The scope of the Instructional Materials Accessibility Plan encompasses printed materials, including textbooks, course readers/course packs, articles and handouts, and also digital materials such as instructional Web sites, e-reserves, digital library materials, video and audio multimedia. CSU is currently working to help faculty and staff who develop their own instructional materials to use universal design, an approach to ensure that a Web site or other materials are designed to be used by as many people as possible, regardless of ability or circumstance.

### **The Bottom Line**

There has been significant buy-in from all levels of the campus for implementing the Accessible Technology Initiative. Everyone from vice presidents to CIOs to the academic staff has very quickly seen the relevance of establishing a formal program for ensuring that CSU Web sites and instructional materials are accessible to everyone. This fits very closely with the

University's commitment to learning, and ensuring that everyone has access to the most effective resources and information for accomplishing that."

Under the Web Accessibility portion of the initiative, by September 2007, new and updated administrative Web sites, Web applications and Web content produced by the CSU or by third-party developers should conform to baseline accessibility standards as defined in Section 508.

And, by May 2009, the program requires that all administrative sites identified as being critical to institutional access should conform to those standards. If remediation or replacement of the Web site is not possible or would constitute an undue burden, then a plan to provide an equally effective alternate form of access must be developed, documented and communicated.

The Instructional Materials Plan portion of the ATI calls for new courses and new course content, including instructional materials and instructional Web sites, to be designed and authored in a way that incorporates accessibility by the fall term of 2008. If it is not possible to incorporate accessibility, then a plan must be presented to provide an equally effective alternate form of access. By the fall term of 2012, instructional materials and instructional Web sites for all course offerings must be accessible.

With its aggressive program for ensuring that everyone – regardless of ability – has access to the same information, CSU is making important strides in learning and equality. ↻



**Deborah Kaplan** is director of the Accessible Technology Initiative at California State University. Contact her at [dkaplan@calstate.edu](mailto:dkaplan@calstate.edu) or 562-951-4251.