

Blackboard

# Beyond the Deadline:

## Creating an Accessible Learning Environment that Lasts

A guide for evaluating accessible learning technologies

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# It’s time for action on accessibility

The looming ADA Title II deadline has placed accessible learning content under the spotlight. In brief, this legislation stipulates that digital content must conform to WCAG 2.1 Level AA standards, with deadlines in April of 2026 and 2027 depending on the size of the area in which your institution is based. Blackboard Ally is supporting hundreds of great colleges and universities working towards Title II compliance – in addition to the scalable content remediation offered by the tool, we have also published a Title II Strategy Guide and Playbook outlining key steps institutions can take to prepare for the changes.

However, accessibility is much better thought of as an opportunity than a responsibility. An opportunity to truly support students; to create a digital learning environment where all feel included and can participate equitably. And an **opportunity** to welcome new student demographics to your institution and build reputational advantage. To view accessible learning through a purely compliance lens is to miss all the benefits it can deliver.

This is why it’s crucial to choose the right technology partner. The Title II deadline has seen an influx of vendors offering a quick fix: automated tools marketed as a shortcut to compliance. Not only is their short-term efficacy often overstated, but these technologies aren’t designed to instill accessible behaviors among your faculty and staff – and thus, don’t deliver on the opportunity described in the paragraph above.

This guide maps out the key considerations when evaluating accessible learning technologies, covering both immediate and longer-term priorities. It outlines all the varied ways in which accessible content benefits your institution and, in so doing, will help you gauge what is most important and assess technology options accordingly.

# Accessibility is a team sport

We encourage you to build a team to support your evaluation process. Accessible content extends well beyond the scope of any one job title or department, and having a range of people involved will ultimately lead to an informed decision.

There are three core areas of consideration:

## Pedagogy

First and foremost, you want to create a great learning experience for your students. It's essential, therefore, that senior faculty and instructional designers are represented, given their expertise in the classroom and strong familiarity with the students you serve. If your institution has dedicated accessibility or disability support, their views will also be valuable here.

## Technology

The accessible learning technology you choose will be just one component of your overall digital learning stack, making it crucial to have those that oversee these environments involved. This starts with team members who manage your LMS, but may also extend to IT more broadly.

## Leadership

The accessibility opportunity can only be realized if driven from the top. Institutional leadership should be involved in the evaluation to identify the partner that best aligns with—and helps to refine—your strategy for growth.

## Quick Hits

### Pedagogy

*(Academic Leadership, Senior Faculty and Instructional Design, Accessibility Experts)*

- Ensure students have automatic and consistent access to popular alternative content formats
- Provide faculty with the insights they need to adopt accessibility best practices at scale

**Full Details:** Page 5

### Technology

*(LMS Administrators and IT)*

- Place institution-wide insights at administrators' fingertips
- Streamline auditing and compliance processes via robust data that spans the full audit trail

**Full Details:** Page 8

### Leadership

*(Executive level stakeholders)*

- Connect accessibility data with BI tools to inform institutional strategy
- Evaluate the true value of your contract: does the vendor charge extra for key capabilities that your institution needs?

**Full Details:** Page 10

# Pedagogy

## Create an inclusive learning environment for all



### Empower Student Choice

As student demographics in higher ed continue to evolve and expand, a core pillar of accessibility is supporting their preferences for learning content. This requires consistent access to a range of content formats, allowing the learner to engage in the way that best suits them – noting that this may differ from task to task.

Automatically providing alternative formats for course content is essential for an inclusive learning environment. This should include all the formats commonly used by students, such as audio, braille, ePub for mobile devices, and tagged PDFs for screen readers, while also allowing text-based content to be tailored to the learner's reading preferences. Easy translation of content into all major languages is also important to support students who aren't native English speakers.

Of course, none of this should place extra demands on faculty. Your accessible learning technology should automatically generate alternative formats for all content in the LMS, empowering student choice without creating additional work.

## Diversity Among Today's College Students: A Snapshot

**1.2 million**
international students attend US colleges each year

*Source: International Educational Exchange)*

**22%**
of the US population speaks a language other than English at home

*Source: US Census*

**+20%**
of US college students report a learning disability

*Source: National Education Statistics*

**25.9%**
are aged 25 or older

*Source: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center*

## Keep instructors at the center

Instructors know their students, their subject, and their content better than anyone. This expertise is essential to creating an inclusive learning environment. When instructors can shape how accessibility is applied in their courses, they can tailor it to what will benefit their students most.

Of course, instructors are balancing a great deal, and time is often in short supply. That's where automation can make a real difference, especially for time-consuming tasks like remediating complex files such as PDFs. The goal is to find the right balance: automation handles the heavy lifting, while instructors keep the final say. When automation works alongside instructors rather than in place of them, the result is more accessible content and a better experience for students.

This approach also pays off over time. As instructors take part in the remediation process, they naturally pick up accessibility practices that carry into how they design future courses. Gradually, this helps build a culture of accessibility across your institution, one where inclusive design becomes second nature and feels less like an extra task.

> **Instructors want to promote accessibility**, but many aren't aware how best to do so. Research commissioned by Blackboard outlines best practices to support faculty, including the important role for technology.

## Place actionable data in instructors' hands

Another staple of a culture of ongoing improvement is data. Specifically, actionable data that allows instructors to understand the accessibility of their courses, prioritize the most impactful remediation work, and improve the student experience accordingly.

This involves two crucial elements. The first is real-time insights, that alert instructors to accessibility fixes as they're building their courses. These small wins, such as adding alternative text for images or tags to a PDF file, make a huge difference when applied at scale.

The second is a more detailed view spanning the entire course. This should provide the instructor with a granular view of accessibility, supported by insights into the fixes that will have the most impact and direct links to related content. Guidance on **how** to approach remediation is also fundamental to ensure ongoing efficiency over time.

## Connect with leading institutions around the globe

Insights can also come from outside your institution. As noted in the intro, accessibility should be considered a team sport – and all of us in higher ed are bound by an ambition to drive the best outcomes for students.

Your technology provider should offer opportunities for you to meaningfully connect with peer institutions, allowing for best practices to be shared. These engagements shouldn't be limited to those in leadership positions, either – in fact, it's arguably faculty who have the most to gain by participating in these shared forums.

### Crucial RFP Considerations: Pedagogy

- Are a wide range of popular alternative formats and translations available for students?
- Can text-based content be adapted to different reading preferences?
- Is automation included responsibly, in a way that doesn't require the instructor to cede control?
- Do instructors have the insights they need, surfaced when they're most valuable?
- Does the vendor extend the opportunity to collaborate and share best practices with other leading institutions?
- When the above points are all considered, does the accessible learning technology support a learning approach that naturally improves over time?



**The Ally Advantage:**

Blackboard Ally supports inclusive learning on an unparalleled scale. In 2025 alone, instructors used Ally to apply nearly **4 million content fixes**, while students downloaded **69 million alternative formats**.

# Technology

## Integrate accessibility into your learning stack



### Ensure flexibility of LMS integration

To start on a brief, functional point, your chosen accessible learning technology should offer integration with all major LMS options – with comparable functionality across the board. This guarantees that the accessibility approach you start today can continue to grow into the future and won't be impacted if you choose to change your LMS platform at a later stage.

### Provide administrators with access to data across the institution

Just as it's important to provide instructors with detailed data for their courses, administrators need insights into overall accessibility metrics across the institution.

The insights should cover everything included in the pedagogy section, spanning usage trends for both students and instructors. On the student side, administrators should have easy access to data that breaks down which alternative formats have been downloaded, how many students are interacting with them, and how this is trending over time. This doesn't require tracking students at an individual level or any use of personalized data; rather, the objective is to generate insights across the student population. As it relates to instructor workflows, it's essential that administrators can see accessibility levels across all courses, allowing focus areas for improvement to be easily identified.

Of course, simply having this data available isn't enough – what's equally important is that it's presented clearly and in a way that improves decision making. An interactive dashboard for administrators is a must have, with strong filtering and drill-down options that allow granular insights to be extracted.

### Simplify compliance and audit processes

As well as supporting internal use, it's important that institution-wide data can be easily exported to assist with compliance and audit processes. Export options should align closely with common auditing tasks, with the flexibility to run for specific time periods and courses as required.

> "Ally positioned us for Title II readiness before it even arrived. Our faculty already understand why accessibility matters, and Ally is a constant reminder and guide on best practices [so] it isn't anything new. It's just part of teaching and supporting every student."
>
> - **Wendy Vélez-Torres,**
> Senior Instructional Technologist and Digital Accessibility Specialist, Coppin State University
>
> Read the case study

Here again, the theme of automation returns. A core limitation of fully automated remediation processes is that often gaps are left in the audit trail, making it unclear which fixes have been applied. These options often overstate the effectiveness of their approach, also; the automated website accessibility tool, accessiBe, was fined heavily by the Federal Trade Commission for 2025, after claims of guaranteed WCAG compliance were found to be misleading. There are no shortcuts when it comes to accessibility compliance - beware of vendors who claim otherwise.

### Crucial RFP Considerations: Technology

- Does the vendor offer seamless integration with all major LMS options?
- Is a thorough administrator dashboard available, with insights into accessibility performance across the institution?
- Can this data be easily exported to support compliance and audit processes?
- Does the provider have a public Accessibility Conformance Report (ACR), spanning WCAG 2.2 Level, New Standard 508 (US) and EN 301 549 (Europe) standards?
- Could high levels of automation potentially jeopardize the audit trail?



**The Ally Advantage:**

Blackboard Ally's instructor-led approach not only provides the best experience for students, but also makes accessibility a shared objective across the institution – lightening the burden of audit processes over time.

# Leadership

## Embed accessibility in your institutional strategy



### Connect accessibility data with other sources

Data has been a common thread through each of the three specialisms involved in the evaluation process. At the leadership level, it's important that data from your accessibility tool can be easily viewed in parallel with other important metrics, thus providing a holistic view of the student experience that can inform strategy.

This can be facilitated via secure REST APIs that integrate directly with common BI tools, such as Power BI and Tableau. This approach places accessibility data consistently at leadership's fingertips, without any requirement to learn new tools or change processes, and ensures accessibility is front of mind when institutional strategies are being developed and refined.

### Confirm what your contract really costs and includes

Sadly, there is often quite a lot of smoke and mirrors when it comes to pricing and contracts in this category. Many providers have different tiers and additional costs for certain features, so it's essential to clarify exactly what is and isn't included in your contract before you sign the dotted line.

The introduction of AI-powered capabilities has made this even more important. Some vendors market their products based on AI features that aren't in fact part of the core package, thus requiring the institution to fork out extra budget or go without important capabilities that they'd bought into.

It's also important to consider future capabilities. Vendors with complicated pricing tiers and add-ons today are more likely to charge you extra for a new feature they introduce tomorrow, rather than adding innovation to the core product.

> **"Institutions that prioritize accessibility also strengthen their reputation, demonstrating a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion."**
>
> The Tambellini Group

## Consider the total cost of ownership

To close, we return to where we started: the accessibility opportunity. As well as evaluating the cost of procuring your new accessible learning software, you should also consider how it can support growth for your institution.

There are three core ways that accessible learning can drive your bottom line:

- A truly inclusive learning environment is likely to improve retention rates, by making courses more engaging and welcoming for students.
- As the number of high-school graduates continues to decline, attracting new demographics is fundamental to grow enrollment. These students are unlikely to choose your institution if accessible learning content isn't prioritized.
- Closely related, there is a reputational advantage for institutions that invest in accessibility. It provides tangible proof that you put learners first, which, in turn, encourages others to choose your institution above competitors.

This highlights the importance of selecting the right technology. This isn't a decision about compliance; it's about learning. And it's about finding a genuine partner that will work alongside you to promote accessibility over time, allowing you to support your students, create an inclusive culture at your institution, and reap the associated financial and reputational benefits.

### Crucial RFP Considerations: Leadership

- Can accessibility data be seamlessly connected with your existing BI tools and reporting?
- Is it clear what is and isn't included in your contract? Are there capabilities you need that come with an additional cost?
- What's being offered – a technology or a genuine partnership? Does the provider have the experience and grounding in education to power an inclusive learning environment in the short, mid and long term?

**The Ally Advantage:**

Blackboard Ally offers simple, inclusive pricing. There are no tiers, add-ons, or extra charges, just a simple contract based on your FTE. All our innovations, including those powered by AI, are included in the standard package.



# What leading institutions are saying about Blackboard Ally

"From the faculty perspective, Ally isn't just a checker; it's a coaching tool. The gauges are so 'in your face' when you open a course that instructors immediately pause and think about what it means for their students. And the step-by-step guidance reduces friction, helping them improve content without becoming WCAG experts overnight."

**Terisa O'Dowd**, Instructional Accessibility Designer, Texas Woman's University
Read the case study

"Blackboard Ally has been a valuable tool for our institution. Its intuitive design and visual indicators help us quickly recognize opportunities to improve accessibility, making it easier to prioritize inclusive content development from the start."

**Melinda Walters**, Learning Systems Analyst, University of the Cumberlands
Read the case study

"Blackboard Ally speeds up the process of making sure that your course is effective and accessible, making it really quick to achieve the highest quality standards for learning content."

**Dr. Celena Kusch**, Executive Director, Center for Academic Innovation and Faculty Support, University of South Carolina Upstate
Read the case study

"I participate in a variety of Community events, and of course the Idea Exchange. All of these things that Blackboard Ally offers are ways for us to have a voice, and they're proactive in seeking client feedback and taking their suggestions into account."

**Dr. Bevin Rainwater**, Assistant Director of Academic Technology and Digital Innovation, University of Hartford

# The pioneer of accessible learning content. Still leading the way.

Blackboard® Ally supports a tailored and welcoming learning experience for all students, powered by a decade's experience and a passionate global accessibility community.

Founded in
**2017**

Powering an accessible learning experience at
**1000+** global institutions

**462 million** content items scanned for accessibility in **2025 alone**

- **Inclusive for Every Learner**: Consistent access to a wide range of alternative content formats.
- **Supportive for Every Instructor**: In-line guidance when producing content, complemented by detailed reporting to prioritize key remediation tasks.
- **Informative for Every Administrator**: In-depth data to power ongoing improvement and support audit processes.
- **Transformative for Every Institution**: A genuine accessibility partnership, grounded in student and institutional growth.










Blackboard

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www.blackboard.com/ally

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