

## MEMORANDUM

**TO:** Dr. Candice Welhausen, Dr. Derek Ross, Dr. Chad Wickman  
**FROM:** Brandi Jean Jones  
**DATE:** February 16, 2020  
**SUBJECT:** Introductory Memo (Web Accessibility in Higher Education)

This memorandum explores the issue of web accessibility and how it is situated within the field of technical and professional communication (TPC). It demonstrates how my own work as both a TPC practitioner and higher education professional directly addresses the issue through relevant research and projects completed throughout my master's program. It also reflects on my experiences as a graduate assistant whose position focused on ensuring web accessibility and developing positive user experiences for visitors of a higher education institution's website. In my future career, I will be using my skills as a technical and professional communicator to assist businesses to implement accessible design principles. The skills that I have developed within the MTPC program will aid me in my future work as a technical communicator.

Keywords: web accessibility, user advocacy, higher education, WCAG 2.0

### **Web Accessibility and Technical Communication**

A website (or any form of technology) is deemed to be fully accessible if all content located within it can be used as effectively by individuals with disabilities as individuals without disabilities (WCAG 2.0). This includes having made considerations for not just sightless and hearing-impaired individuals, but those that have physical limitations as well. Web accessibility scholar, Abid Ismail, affirms that "all different types of disabilities like Visual disabilities, Audio Disabilities, Speech, Cognitive and Learning disabilities, etc. (must be addressed) when designing and building websites" (Ismail & Kuppusamy, 2018, par. 2). According to the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.0), every element of a website should be examined for accessibility, including items such as PDFs, texted documents, spreadsheets, tables, presentations, eBooks, videos, mobile applications, etc. (WCAG 2.0).

It is essential for website creators and designers to regard their unique and diverse user base when creating websites, as many users rely on web accessibility. More specifically, the World Health Organization has declared that "worldwide, there are 300 million people with a disability, including an estimated 180 million visually-impaired and 250 million hearing-impaired individuals" (Deafness and hearing loss, 2019), while a 2011 survey further detailed how "54% of adults living with a disability have an active online presence" (Duggan & Brenner, 2014).

The idea of web accessibility and inclusion for all users aligns with TPC scholar Rose's (2016) connection between human-centered design and technical communication. Human-centered design, as defined by Rose, (2016) is "an approach that focuses on the needs, contexts, desires, and input of the people who are the audience, or users, of the design"(Rose, 428). Rose's framing of human-centered design proposes a logic behind having a fully accessible and user-friendly web presence. The implications of this framing also appear in the work of Natasha N. Jones, who

says that technical communicators have the "content knowledge, the responsibility, and the power and potential to address issues of social justice and equality through their research and pedagogy," undertaking the dilemma of web accessibility connects with technical communicator's ability to serve as advocates for the user and to work to improve the human experience for the oppressed (Jones, 349).

### **Web Accessibility in the Context of Higher Education**

The issue of web accessibility in the context of higher education institutions is significant because it affects all types of higher education institutions that receive federal funding or that are accountable for complying with the Rehabilitation Act of 1973's Section 508. Section 508 declares that "all electronic and information technology used by the federal government [must] be accessible to people with disabilities" (Title II of the Civil Rights Act, Public Accommodations, 2016). While this Act was originally written to provide accessibility standards for organizations within the federal sector, higher education institutions are now considered to be subject to the Act's requirements because they almost universally receive funding from the federal government (Lagrow, 2017).

If higher education institutions fail to make their public-facing websites fully accessible to their users, legal action may be taken against the institution. According to Lindsay McKenzie of Inside Higher Ed., "hundreds of colleges and universities across the country are currently under investigation by the Education Department's Office for Civil Rights for failing to make their websites accessible to people with disabilities" (McKenzie, 2018, par. 1).

Along with these legal ramifications, institutions of higher education that are not providing web accessibility can alienate members of their user base. According to Cursive Content, "a college's website is the first destination for many prospective students and parents when beginning to research schools, and one out of five students removed a university from consideration after a bad experience with the school's website" (Schmitz). When considering that "eleven percent of all college and university students in the U.S. today have disabilities, which adds up to more than 2.25 million students," higher education institutions are risking not successfully meeting the needs of a large section of their user base by not being web accessible (ADA Compliance Guidelines for Web Accessibility, 2018).

By considering the intrinsic worth of the user and employing a human-centric approach to web design, higher education institutions can both fully comply with federal regulations (Section 508) while also proving their user base with an accessible and user-friendly web presence. Additionally, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities states that having complete access to information and communications technologies and systems is one element that will "enable persons with disabilities to participate more fully in all aspects of life" ("Article 9 - Accessibility Enable"). Further aligning with the role of the technical communicator as an advocate, Walton's concept of supporting human dignity and human rights can be applied when examining the issue of web accessibility in higher education (Walton, 2016). As communicator and advocate, the technical communicator is not only bound to improve accessibility by the requirements of the job, but also the ethics of the profession.

## **Experience as Graduate Assistant**

Through my work as a graduate assistant for Auburn University's College of Liberal Works, I was able to employ human-centered design techniques in my role as a technical communicator and web accessibility strategist. Familiarizing myself (and the Web Development and Strategy team) with the principals of human-centered and universal design, I was able to assist in designing and executing user-friendly and fully accessible websites for CLA, including the Department of Foreign Language and Literatures and the Department of English. Some of my accomplishments from this role include assisting in conducting a wide-scale usability research project that consisted of conducting approximately 150 user research tests (card sorting activities and participant interviews) with students across Auburn University's campus to better understand how real-life site users interact with CLA's website. Additionally, I was able to complete in-depth accessibility analysis reports for multiple departmental websites, aiding CLA in increasing the overall accessibility of its web presence. I also created training guides and videos for future employees of CLA. These videos centered around topics of accessibility (such as "How to Create an Accessible Microsoft Word Document, and "How to Create an Accessible Adobe PDF File") and conduct one-on-one training sessions with CLA faculty and staff. Through my coordinated minor of Higher Education Administration, I was able to work with higher education professionals on projects relating to technical communication principles surrounding web accessibility and complete an informational session detailing the importance of web accessibility in higher education.

## **Portfolio Artifacts**

The following artifacts are examples of work from both my courses and graduate assistantship during my time in Auburn University's Master of Technical and Professional Communication program. Each artifact represents some portion of my focus and expertise in accessibility and usability work, particularly in the context of higher education. These artifacts together showcase the diverse skills that I've honed and the experience that I've gained as a developing technical communicator and web accessibility specialist in the field.

### *Artifact #1 (Usability Testing Report Package Graduate Assistantship)*

This usability testing report package was completed collaboratively with a team member in my graduate assistantship with CLA's Office of Communication and Marketing, in Fall 2019. The project consisted of conducting approximately 150 user research tests (card sorting activities and participant interviews) with students across Auburn University's campus to better understand how real-life site users interact with CLA's website. Data and insights discovered from these user research tests were used as the foundation of CLA's large-scale website redesign project, which began in the Fall of 2019. This usability testing report package was compiled to deliver to CLA department heads and key stakeholders, informing them of how their respective departments fared during user research testing. Additionally, this package contains general and specific observations from the testing, and findings from participant interviews. It also offers recommendations for overall improvement of each site, and mockups of a redesigned navigation bar for each site.

### *Artifact #2 (Website Analysis)*

This website analysis was completed individually in Dr. Stewart Whittemore's English 7010 course, Technical and Professional Communication: Issues and Approaches, in Fall 2018. The project consisted of examining a website and reviewing its functionality and accessibility, while also giving background and context to the various fundamentals of web accessibility. The site chosen for evaluation was Auburn University's Department of English. To complete this project, I studied the history of web accessibility and familiarized myself with the four principles of web accessibility, as detailed by the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.0). I then inspected five pages within the Department of English's site and investigated the accessibility of each page using a web accessibility evaluation tool (WAVE). Afterward, I compiled the results for the use of CLA's Web Development and Strategy team in their website redesign efforts.

### *Artifact #3 Memo (Technical Editing Markup)*

This technical editing project was completed independently in Dr. Susan Youngblood's English 7000 course, Technical Editing, in Fall 2018. The project consisted of reviewing, editing, and providing electronic markups to international authors for an academic manuscript submitted to the International Journal of Acoustics and Vibrations (IJAV) for consideration of publication. This project was completed in Microsoft Word 2018, with the track changes and comments features being displayed. With this project, I was responsible for ensuring that the manuscript accurately followed the style guide utilized by the IJAV editorial team, the manuscript correctly followed the submission guidelines outlined in the author instructions, and that the overall language used in the document was clear and understandable by a broad audience.

### *Artifact #4 (Website Redesign Project)*

This website redesign project was completed collaboratively with a team member in Dr. Candice Welhausen's English 7080 course, Document Design, in Spring 2019. The project consisted of analyzing an existing website for a client, communicating with the client to determine their wants and needs, and redesigning their website (and other branding materials) using visual rhetoric theories and principles of design. This project was completed for the Alabama Council on Human Relations (ACHR), located in Auburn, AL. The tools used for this project included Adobe Illustrator, Photoshop, XD, and WordPress. With this project, I was responsible for collaborating with my team member to redesign ACHR's website and other branding materials to better serve the needs of their users. Our focus for this project was to redesign the site using a new CMS, design new logo variations and a color scheme, and choose typography that better fits the needs of ACHR's audiences while providing a modern aesthetic.

### *Artifact #5 (Grant Package\_Grant Writing)*

This grant package was completed individually in Dr. Derek Ross's English 7070 course, Grant Writing, in Fall 2019. The project consisted of working with a client to research, write, and compile a grant package to be submitted for funding consideration. This project was completed for Auburn University's Auburn Cares organization, located in Auburn, AL. The goal of this project was to support Auburn Cares by crafting a grant package for its Campus Food Pantry

project that successfully used rhetorical strategies to appeal to the grant committee of the Donaldson Foundation. To best understand the needs of my client, I had introductory consultations where I met with Katherine Hettinger (Manager of Auburn Cares) to determine the exact wants and needs of her organization. Using this information, I was able to research appropriate funding channels and determine the best funding opportunity-The Donaldson Foundation. I then conducted thorough research into the foundation to discover trends in their funding patterns and to get a better idea of which rhetorical strategies would work most effectively. I was able to use these insights to craft a grant package that would appeal best to the foundation, and that would give Auburn Cares an advantage in the competitive funding process.

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