

# **The Accessibility Gap:** Why Faculty Struggle and How Institutions Can Help



## Methodology

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The data in this white paper is drawn from the **2025 Anthology Faculty Survey**, conducted in April 2025. The survey collected responses from **2,508 actively teaching faculty members at colleges and universities across the United States**. The instrument was administered online via a national research panel. It included questions on accessibility awareness, student engagement, instructional tools, and institutional support. Results were analyzed in aggregate and appended with supplemental data provided by Anthology to support strategic research, content development, and advocacy efforts in higher education.

# A Growing Responsibility, Without the Support

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Supporting accessibility is central to the mission of higher education: expanding knowledge and opening doors of opportunity for every learner. If the goal is to help students better their lives, then ensuring equitable access to learning is not optional—it is essential.

It is also now the law. In April 2024, the US Department of Justice (DOJ) finalized updates to Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), requiring almost all public higher education institutions to meet Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1 AA standards across their digital content, including course materials, by April 2026.\* Across the Atlantic, the European Accessibility Act is driving similar requirements for digital services, with compliance deadlines beginning in 2025. And these are not isolated cases—countries such as Canada, Australia, and the UK have also strengthened accessibility regulations in recent years. Together, these developments reflect a global regulatory trend: accessibility is no longer a “nice to have” or a matter of institutional preference, but a legal and cultural mandate that reaches from policy decisions down to everyday practice in the classroom.

Faculty are where this change meets its most important test: the classroom. The decisions instructors make about course materials, assignments, and online learning spaces directly affect whether students can fully, easily, and equitably participate. Yet our 2025 Anthology Faculty Survey shows that while instructors care deeply about equitable access, many lack the awareness, training, tools, and confidence to deliver it.

## Our research points to three interrelated gaps holding institutions back:

- **The Awareness Gap:** Faculty often don't know about accessibility requirements or the new mandate to meet them
- **The Resource Gap:** Instructors lack the time, training, and tools needed to consistently incorporate accessibility into their work
- **The Confidence Gap:** Even those who want to act are unsure how to make content accessible

This white paper explores each of these gaps in turn, drawing on responses from 2,508 US faculty to show where challenges persist—and, more importantly, to outline practical steps institutions can take to close them. The goal is to move accessibility from a compliance checkbox to a shared culture of inclusion that empowers faculty, supports students, and strengthens institutional success.

\*Compliance deadlines are tied to the population served by the public entity that governs the institution (e.g., state or local government), not student enrollment. Public entities serving populations of 50,000 or more must comply by April 2026; those serving fewer than 50,000 must comply by April 2027.

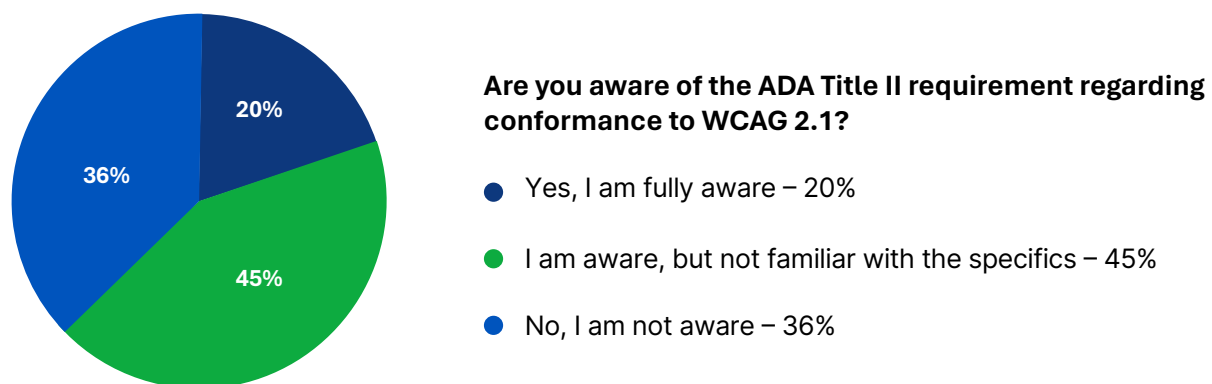
## The Awareness Gap

The DOJ's updated Title II rule is a wake-up call for public higher education. It mandates that digital content, services, and platforms used by public institutions must meet WCAG 2.1 AA standards by April 2026.

*WCAG 2.1 AA standards are accessibility guidelines that require content—like course documents, videos, and websites—to be readable, navigable, and usable by people with disabilities, including those using screen readers or keyboard-only navigation.*

This includes course content in the learning management system (LMS), departmental websites, campus forms, and more. For instructors, that means everything from course documents to video assets and PDFs now fall under a new level of scrutiny.

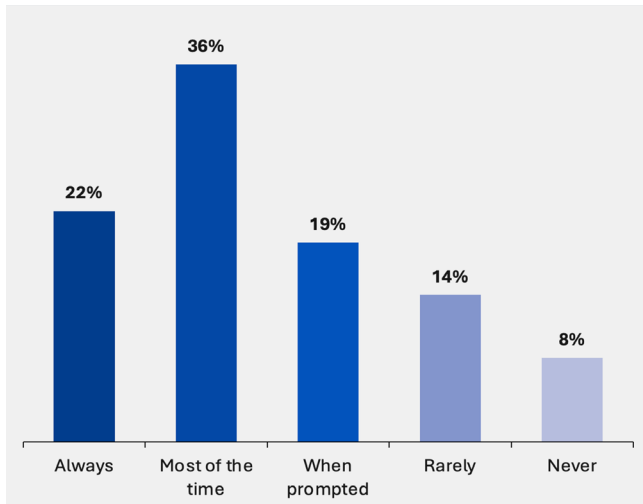
Yet only 20% of faculty are aware of this deadline and what it means.



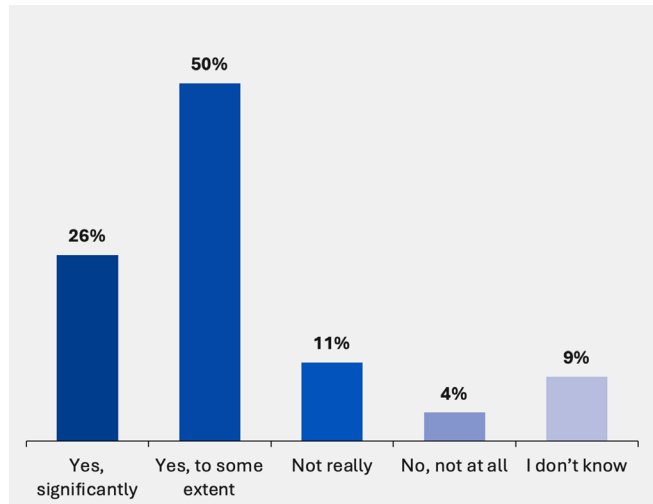
Additionally, our survey found that only 22% of faculty report “always” thinking about the accessibility needs of students when creating or sharing digital content and courses.

This begs the question: why aren't faculty more focused on the accessibility of their course material? These same surveyed faculty overwhelmingly feel that accessible digital content can improve overall student performance and learning outcomes, with 26% saying yes, significantly, and 50% saying yes, to some extent.

**How often do you consider the accessibility needs of your students when creating or sharing digital content and courses (e.g., videos, presentations, documents)?**



**Do you feel that accessible digital content can improve overall student performance and learning outcomes?**



This lack of awareness is not necessarily due to indifference. More often, it reflects fragmented communication and the absence of clear, consistent messaging from leadership. Many faculty only hear about accessibility during sporadic training sessions or when a problem arises, rather than as part of ongoing professional development. For some instructors, the first time they encounter the concept in depth is when a student requests an accommodation—at which point adjustments are reactive, time-consuming, and less effective.

Closing this gap starts with elevating accessibility from a compliance reminder buried in policy documents to making it a visible, daily expectation, reinforced through course design reviews, leadership modeling, and the right tools.

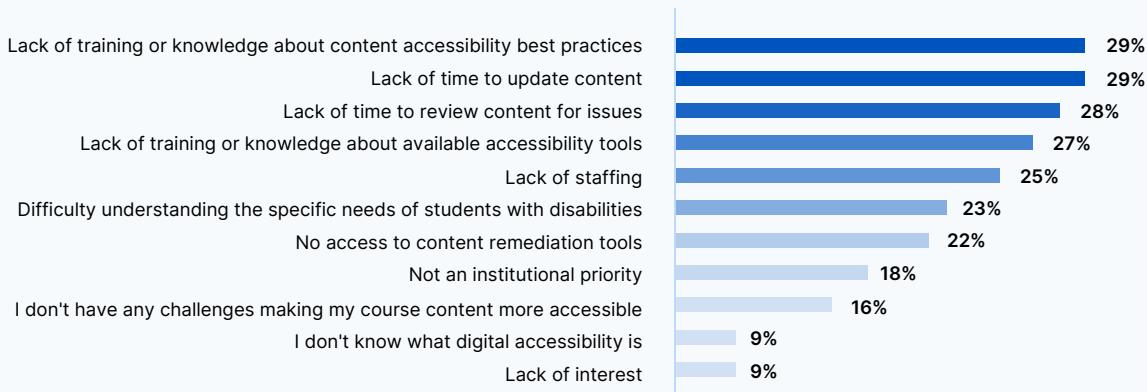
Awareness is the first barrier, but it's not the only one. Even when faculty understand what's required, many still face the challenge of not having the means to follow through. That's where the resource gap comes into play.

## The Resource Gap

In our survey, faculty cited lack of training or knowledge on best practices (29%), lack of time (28%), lack of staffing (25%), and accessibility not being seen as an institutional priority (18%) as top challenges in making their course content more accessible.

When instructors don't have enough time, access to training, or appropriate tools, it's understandable that accessibility improvements fall by the wayside. But that has real consequences: students are left without equal access to learning, and institutions expose themselves to legal and reputational risk.

### What challenges do you face in making your course content more accessible/ building digital courses? (Select up to three)



In practice, the resource gap shows up in multiple ways. Faculty may be handed policy expectations without the tools to meet them, they may have access to a tool but no training on how to use it effectively, or they may struggle with technology that isn't intuitive.

Even when training is offered, it's often scheduled at times that conflict with teaching duties or delivered in a "one-and-done" format that doesn't allow for follow-up. Without a clear system for prioritizing accessibility work, instructors have to choose between grading assignments, preparing lessons, and remediating course materials—an impossible trade-off that leaves students with inconsistent experiences.

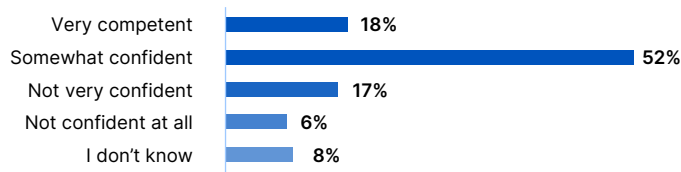
Closing the resource gap requires more than technology; it demands clear expectations and support that fit faculty workloads. Even then, one hurdle remains: confidence. Faculty need to feel safe practicing new skills without fear of making mistakes.

## The Confidence Gap

Even faculty who care deeply about doing the right thing often hesitate to act. Why? Because they aren't confident in their ability to create accessible content.

Our research showed that only 18% of instructors feel "very confident" in this respect, while another 52% say they're only "somewhat confident."

### How confident are you in your ability to create or modify digital content following content accessibility best practices?



Confidence is built through repetition, feedback, and small wins, but most faculty experience the opposite. They may encounter accessibility checkers that flag dozens of “errors” without explaining why they matter or how to fix them. This can create a sense of overwhelm or fear of doing the wrong thing, leading some to avoid making changes altogether. And for new instructors, the pressure to meet accessibility standards without prior exposure and experience can feel like learning an entirely new skillset on top of mastering course design, grading, and student engagement.

Without adequate resources, accessibility too often becomes a process of “retrofitting” existing materials in response to issues or accommodation requests, rather than being considered at the beginning of the course creation process. This reactive approach not only increases the burden on faculty but also makes it harder to deliver consistent, equitable experiences for all students. By contrast, when institutions invest in resources up front—supported by the right technologies, recognition for progress, and a culture that values growth over perfection—faculty are empowered to integrate accessibility as a proactive part of their teaching practice.

Over time, this cultural shift not only improves accessibility but embeds it as a natural part of how faculty think about teaching and how they define quality course materials. Just as importantly, it centers the human experience—ensuring that students feel included, respected, and able to fully participate—so accessibility becomes synonymous not only with legal responsibility, but with educational excellence.

By addressing all three of these gaps in sequence: raising awareness, providing the right resources, and building confidence, institutions can create a self-reinforcing cycle in which accessibility is not only possible, but expected, supported, and celebrated.

## How Institutions Can Take Action

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Addressing the accessibility gap requires more than a single solution; it takes coordinated and consistent action across multiple fronts. Institutions must first ensure faculty understand the importance and expectations of accessibility, then give them the right balance of resources and automation to make the work feasible, and finally provide tools designed to build confidence over time.

By tackling each of these areas: the awareness gap, the resource gap, and the confidence gap, institutions can create lasting change that benefits every learner.

## Closing the Awareness Gap: A Culture of Accessibility

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Meeting Title II requirements will demand more than compliance—it will require a cultural shift. Faculty need to see accessibility not as a final checklist item, but as an integral part of teaching excellence. That shift starts with leadership sending a clear message that accessibility is a shared responsibility, not an optional extra. When senior administrators reference accessibility in strategic plans, department chairs model it in their own course materials, and success stories are highlighted at faculty meetings, the importance of accessibility becomes both visible and credible.

That shift starts when institutions embed accessibility expectations into instructional design, provide visible leadership support, and celebrate progress, not just perfection. Celebrating incremental improvements—like a faculty member improving the accessibility score of a course from 50% to 75%—can help instructors see their efforts as meaningful contributions rather than additional challenges on top of their already heavy workloads. Institutions can also integrate accessibility checkpoints into course review processes, ensuring they are considered from the outset rather than retrofitted after the fact.

Microcredentials and champion programs give faculty visible credit for building new skills, while student voices, through testimonials or feedback, make the value of accessibility personal and real. Extending these efforts beyond the LMS to websites, library systems, and other digital services reinforces that accessibility is not a narrow compliance task, but a principle that spans the entire academic environment.

By creating a culture where accessibility is valued, reinforced, and rewarded, institutions can ensure that awareness isn't a one-time training topic—it's a daily habit that shapes how courses are built and delivered. Over time, this cultural reinforcement means that accessibility moves from being "someone else's job" to being a natural part of every educator's craft.

*"Accessibility isn't a checklist we rush at the end; it's an ethical stance we design for from the start. When institutions build cultures where accessibility is a central theme, it stops being seen as extra work and becomes part of what it means to teach well. Leadership must set expectations, programs must scaffold practice, and faculty should be recognized for progress. That's how accessibility moves from compliance to culture, and ultimately, to inclusion."*

— **Tonia A. Dousay**, PhD, Dean, School of Education, University of Alaska Anchorage

## Closing the Resource Gap: Controlled and Responsible Automation

With limited time, staffing, and training, faculty need help addressing accessibility at scale. Well-designed tools and AI can play an important role, but only if used thoughtfully. When deployed well, technology can lift considerable burdens from instructors' plates, such as checking images for missing alt text and using AI to generate suggestions, while still keeping them engaged in decisions that require human judgment.

Over-reliance on AI risks creating new barriers, as machine-generated fixes often miss the context that only humans can provide. For example, a tool might "fix" an image by inserting the file name as alt text, or apply a generic label like "image," which technically looks like a solution in a dashboard

but provides no meaningful information to a visually impaired learner. Another common issue is with scanned PDFs: automation may run OCR and mark the file as “accessible,” but still fail to add the proper reading order or heading structure, leaving the document unusable for a student relying on a screen reader. In these cases, institutions may believe they’ve reduced risk when, in fact, they’ve increased it by creating a false sense of security. Faculty insight and human oversight are required to ensure that accessibility enhancements are not just technically correct but educationally relevant.

The most effective approach combines automated detection and AI-assisted tools with guided, human-centered correction, so technology supports rather than replaces the educator’s role. This balance not only protects instructional quality but also transforms the accessibility process into an active learning opportunity for faculty.

*“AI-powered tools can do so much to help us—scanning for issues, generating suggestions, and streamlining routine tasks that would otherwise overwhelm faculty. But accessibility is about meaning and context. Technology can point the way, but it can’t decide what an image represents to a learner, how content should flow for understanding, or what message is most important to convey. That’s where human oversight and intentionality are indispensable. The real promise of AI is not in replacing educators, but in freeing them to focus on the judgment, empathy, and creativity that make content truly inclusive.”*

— **Darren Denham**, Assistant Director of Digital Accessibility, University of Central Oklahoma

**Anthology® Ally** applies this principle by running in the background to identify accessibility issues—such as images missing alt text—then explaining why they matter and walking instructors through the fix. This reduces workload without sacrificing accuracy or instructional intent. By integrating seamlessly into the LMS, Ally ensures that faculty don’t have to leave their existing workflows, making it easier for them to take action in the moment rather than putting fixes off until later.

## Closing the Confidence Gap: Intelligent Product Design

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Even the most well-intentioned faculty hesitate if they're unsure how to act. Intelligent product design lowers this barrier by making accessibility tools intuitive, integrated, and encouraging. When an interface is designed to guide rather than judge, it shifts the experience from one of compliance anxiety to one of skill-building. Importantly, that skill-building goes beyond meeting a legal requirement. It reinforces the idea that creating accessible content is simply part of good instruction and an act of doing right by students, ensuring every learner has the chance to fully engage with the material. The best tools offer clear explanations, examples, and progress indicators that reassure instructors they are moving in the right direction, encouraging them and helping build positive momentum.

When tools are intuitive and forgiving, and when they show progress—not just errors—they inspire action. That action builds confidence over time. This confidence compounds: an instructor who successfully fixes a document's heading structure today is more likely to ensure that their next document is structured correctly from the start. Over time, confidence turns into competence, and competence into habit.

*“Indiana University is expanding accessibility awareness beyond instructional designers and giving faculty the tools they need to keep content compliant throughout the semester. Our philosophy is to empower faculty to design accessible materials from the start. Faculty are already balancing teaching, research, and administrative demands, so they need intuitive tools at the point of need—tools that make accessibility second nature.”*

—Michael Mace, Manager of Assistive Technology Accessibility Centers, Indiana University

Ally's in-LMS guidance shows progress alongside issues, turning accessibility improvements into teachable moments that provide valuable context rather than punitive checklists. By aligning with instructor workflows and offering constructive feedback, tools like Ally don't just fix problems; they build lasting skills and confidence. The result is a faculty body that doesn't just comply with accessibility standards, but understands and values why they exist—and knows how to meet them without hesitation.

## Moving Beyond Compliance

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Closing the awareness, resource, and confidence gaps is not just about meeting a legal requirement—it's about ensuring every student has the opportunity to succeed. Institutions that succeed in this work will see benefits that ripple beyond accessibility: higher student engagement, increased retention and persistence, and better institutional reputation.

Institutions that approach accessibility as a cultural priority, supported by thoughtful automation and intelligent product design that puts humans in the center, can create lasting improvements that go far beyond compliance.

By making accessibility achievable, sustainable, and part of everyday teaching practice, they not only protect themselves from risk but also strengthen the quality, inclusivity, and impact of the education they deliver. When accessibility is embedded into the DNA of an institution, it becomes a driver of both student success and instructional excellence—proving that doing the right thing for learners is also the smart thing for the institution.

### **Two Streams, One Goal: Remediation and Education in Parallel**

When institutions talk about accessibility, the conversation often defaults to reactive remediation: fixing existing course content so it meets compliance standards. That work is essential, particularly in light of changing legislation, but it's only half of the equation. If institutions only focus on fixing what's already broken, their content is effectively wearing a perpetual bandage. The deeper opportunity lies in building faculty skills and habits so that new content is created with accessibility in mind from the very start.

Research on behavioral change reinforces this point. Studies of habit formation show that sustainable behaviors are built through small, repeated actions over time (typically requiring weeks or months of reinforcement before they become automatic).<sup>1</sup> In other words, lasting change comes when people see both immediate results and long-term growth. Remediation provides the immediate impact as students gain access to course materials that might otherwise exclude them, but education, meanwhile, creates the long-term habit—helping faculty internalize accessibility as a natural part of how they design and deliver learning.

Institutions that advance these two streams in parallel, remediating past content while educating faculty for the future, avoid falling into the trap of “one step forward, one step back.” Instead, they create compounding progress: today's fixes serve students right now, and tomorrow's courses arrive already designed with inclusion in mind.

Leaning into both streams also reinforces faculty confidence. When instructors are not only shown what needs fixing but also taught how to prevent the issue next time, accessibility stops feeling like an endless cycle of corrections and starts becoming a professional skill they're proud to master.

**For institutions, this is the difference between compliance as a burden and accessibility as a culture.**

<sup>1</sup>[How are habits formed: Modelling habit formation in the real world](#) | Wiley Online Library | European Journal of Social Psychology

## Anthology Is Here to Help

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Making these changes can feel like a big lift, but you don't have to figure it out alone.

At Anthology, we work side by side with institutions to help them meet their accessibility goals in a way that's practical, sustainable, and aligned with how faculty actually teach. Whether you're just starting your accessibility journey or refining a mature accessibility strategy, Anthology can help build a plan that works for your instructors, your workflows, and ultimately, your students.

Anthology Ally is one part of that support. A better way to make better content, Ally is designed to make accessibility improvements part of the everyday teaching process, not an extra chore on top of everything else. Ally offers:

- **Just-in-time tips and guidance for instructors** so they can fix issues as they create content, and learn best practices in doing so
- **Step-by-step, human-centered fixes built right into the LMS** workflow, so users don't need to learn new systems or even have a separate login
- **Actionable reports for administrators** that show patterns, progress, and opportunities for improvement
- **Multiple content formats for students**, giving learners the flexibility to engage with materials in the way that works for them

The result? A realistic, faculty-friendly path to meeting legal requirements and serving your mission to support every learner.

## Additional Resources

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- [Empowering learning through inclusive design | Our Commitment to Accessibility: Anthology](#)
- [Webinar: Americans with Disabilities Act Title II Web & Mobile Application Accessibility Rule | US Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division](#)
- [Guidance on Web Accessibility and the ADA | US Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division](#)
- [The Imperfection of Accessibility in Instructional Design: An Ethical Dilemma | EdTech Books](#)
- [Addressing the Hidden Crisis: The Realities of Faculty Burnout and What Comes Next | Anthology](#)

Need additional support? [Contact us to speak with our accessibility experts.](#)

## About Anthology

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Anthology delivers education and technology solutions so that students can reach their full potential and learning institutions thrive. Millions of students around the world are supported throughout their education journey via Anthology's ecosystem of flagship SaaS solutions and supporting services, including the award-winning Blackboard® (LMS), Anthology® Student (SIS/ERP), and Anthology® Reach (CRM). Through the Power of Together™, we are uniquely inspiring educators and institutions with innovation that is meaningful, simple, and intelligent to help customers redefine what's possible and create life-changing opportunities for people everywhere. [anthology.com](https://anthology.com)

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