FEATURE

A Cohort Model Approach to Addressing Library Accessibility in a Large, Devolved Library System

Colleen Lougen, Rebecca Albrecht Oling, Claire Payne, Shannon Pritting, and Carli Spina

When the State University of New York (SUNY) system mandated that all sixty of its institutions develop accessibility plans in 2019, library accessibility was one of several key elements. Accordingly, SUNY librarians created a community of practice—modeled in part after the approaches adopted by several other large library systems—to identify system-wide accessibility best practices and to develop expertise that was dispersed across multiple campuses. SUNY's Library Accessibility Cohort provided a conducive environment for discussion and the coordination of training and accessibility reviews. The initiative successfully undertook the evaluation of a large number of subscription databases and created documentation to support those at other SUNY campuses and beyond who undertake this work in the future. Cohort members encountered a number of obstacles throughout this accessibility work, many of which were made more complex due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, despite these challenges, the cohort's experience validated the potential benefits of a collaborative approach to this work. It is hoped that the cohort's insights and best practices toolkit will assist other libraries and provide the groundwork for future initiatives.

In 2019, the State University of New York (SUNY) Board of Trustees approved an Electronic and Information Technology (EIT) Accessibility Policy for the SUNY system, which "ensures appropriate campus and system-level commitment to support equal and integrated access to all of its programs, services, and activities" across all sixty SUNY campuses.[1] As part of this new policy, campuses were required to submit accessibility action plans that addressed the accessibility of library digital resources, among other areas. When tasked with realizing the library portion of these plans, SUNY embraced a hybrid approach of providing central system-level support coupled with fostering professional development within a cohort intended to create a community of practice. As a large system with a historically devolved organizational structure in which implementation of these types of system-wide policies is left to individual campuses, this supported individual campuses in developing local expertise and allowed them to make individualized decisions that are suited to their specific institution.

SUNY Library Services, a small office that supports several major centralized operations in the system, had successfully used cohort models in the past. In this case, with the scope of the accessibility plans in mind, the office created the cohort with the goal of empowering a group of distributed librarians to

Colleen Lougen (lougenc@newpaltz.edu), Electronic Resources Librarian, SUNY New Paltz. **Rebecca Albrecht Oling** (rebecca.oling@purchase.edu), Director of Digital Accessibility, Purchase College, SUNY. **Claire Payne** (ccpwml@rit.edu), College of Art and Design Liaison/Librarian, Rochester Institute of Technology. **Shannon Pritting** (shannon.pritting@sunyempire.edu), Director of Library Services, Open and Digital Learning Assets, Empire State University. **Carli Spina** (carli_spina@fitnyc.edu), Associate Professor and Head of Research & Instructional Services, SUNY's Fashion Intitute of Technology.

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collaboratively participate in and advise on accessibility initiatives. Over the course of the cohort's first year (2020–2021), the group worked carefully to grow their own competencies in digital accessibility, develop effective means of collaboration, and build a supportive virtual community. The cohort model allowed the group to develop a shared accessibility compliance review process and to complete Voluntary Product Accessibility Template (VPAT) reviews for the most commonly subscribed content across SUNY. Members also developed a toolkit of resources to allow other librarians involved in procurement processes to effectively find and use their accessibility reviews, templates, and other tools. The development and growth of this cohort as well as its outputs illustrate the potential efficacy of a collaboration within a large consortium as well as the challenges that can arise with such a model.

Background

About SUNY

SUNY comprises several types of institutions, including university research centers, university colleges offering a range of undergraduate and graduate programs, community colleges of various sizes, technology colleges, medical centers, and smaller specialized institutions offering undergraduate and graduate programs. The sizes of the institutions vary, with twenty campuses having fewer than 2,500 full-time equivalent (FTE), six having over 12,000 FTE, and the remaining being within the 2,500-10,000 FTE range. Since the institutions differ in size and type, the libraries also have various levels of staff, capability, and interest in undertaking new initiatives locally. This diversity makes centralized and cooperative programs challenging in SUNY and often requires a hybrid approach that combines both local and central coordination. Central office staff assist with implementation and provide some direct campus support in areas related to information technology and libraries. Additionally, campuses have local staffing and often prefer to address issues and perform work in-house. The System Administration Office in SUNY typically employs a blended approach for system-wide initiatives in which policy is developed and approved by the SUNY Board of Trustees, with initial funding provided to support the implementation and adoption of policies, with the long-term funding, support, maintenance, and refinement left to campuses.

Electronic Information Technology (EIT) Accessibility Policy and Implications

In the EIT Accessibility Policy,[2] all institutions within the SUNY system are required to address accessibility for programs, services, and activities. Specifically, institutions were required to submit accessibility plans. The framework for the accessibility plans included six standards related to websites and software, digital content, classroom technology, library guidelines, and procurement accessibility conformance standards.[3] The development of these plans prompted SUNY Library Services (SLS) to form this cohort, since contextualizing the accessibility of library e-resources would be an essential part of complying with this policy. In particular, the guidance around procurement accessibility conformance standards specifically mentioned Voluntary Product Accessibility Templates as a key piece of documentation,[4] which led to an increased focus on requesting the documents at SUNY institutions.

The VPAT Instrument

Developed by the Information Technology Industry Council, VPATs provide a standardized way for vendors to evaluate the degree to which their product meets accessibility standards.[5] VPATs "declare the degree of conformance using one of four conformance levels: supports; partially supports; does not support; or not applicable."[6] The standards upon which conformance is determined depend on the version of the VPAT used. There are templates that focus on the United States' Revised Section 508 standards, the European Union's "accessibility requirements suitable for public procurement of ICT [information and communications technology] products and services in Europe," and the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1, as well as a version that incorporates all three. Section 508 dictates that the ICT used by federal agencies in the United States must be accessible to people with disabilities. Many non-federal agencies, both public and private, rely on WCAG, which are published by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), the main standards organization for the internet.

The VPAT has become the industry standard for how vendors of information and communications technology demonstrate the level of compliance of their products. A VPAT provides an organized means of explaining known issues, evaluating products, and even facilitating comparisons between products or versions of a single product. In the library sphere, an increasing number of libraries, universities and university systems, and consortia are requesting or, in some cases, even requiring that vendors provide VPATs or other accessibility compliance information for their products.[7] While not all vendors are willing to provide a VPAT for their products, and others may not have an up-to-date VPAT available, one of the advantages of this template is that an employee of an individual library (or another third-party) can complete a review of a product using the VPAT model. The structure also facilitates reviewing any completed VPATs that vendors provide for accuracy. Since research suggests that many VPATs provided by vendors are not accurate depictions of product accessibility,[8] some libraries have undertaken reviews of individual products and their VPATs to verify the vendors' statements and the overall accessibility.

Review of Approaches to Accessibility Audits

Before forming the cohort, SLS and the SUNY System EIT Accessibility Officer reviewed the approaches of other groups, institutions, and consortia. It is important to situate the structure of our work within the larger ecosystem of libraries and consortia that are undertaking accessibility audits. A number of approaches to this work have emerged in the literature, and our cohort model drew from several of them. Some libraries have pursued this work without collaboration with other institutions, which results in resource limitations. For example, when Grand Valley State University began a program of auditing VPATs, they found that they "did not have the resources or time to conduct even a handful of large-scale accessibility reviews" and therefore had to focus their work on a limited number of common issues.[9] Similarly, when librarians at Wichita State University (WSU) undertook a review of VPATs, they also relied on a checklist that focused on "11 VPAT criteria deemed most essential, not only for WSU Libraries accessibility goals, but for users with visual, auditory, mobility and/or cognitive

impairments."[10] One advantage of a cohort model was that it offered an opportunity to conduct more comprehensive reviews because the work could be divided between many participants.

When we started our work, we knew that other institutions had successfully built collaborations across libraries and campuses. An exemplar is the Library Accessibility Alliance (originally called the Big Ten Academic Alliance Library E-Resource Accessibility Group).[11] First conceived in 2015, this organization spans multiple libraries at various higher education institutions. They have worked on many initiatives, including developing model license language around accessibility, but a key area of focus has been e-resource accessibility auditing.[12] The cross-institutional collaboration present in the Library Accessibility Alliance was a core piece of its success and, as such, served as an inspiration and guide for our cohort, even as we adopted different means of VPAT auditing.[13]

On a smaller scale, there was also evidence that intra-state partnerships could be beneficial. The Tennessee Board of Regents' Libraries Accessibility Task Force successfully collected VPATs from vendors and developed form language that libraries could use. Through a collaborative process, they assessed member training needs, tailored activities to fit existing capabilities, and expanded member expertise.[14] These joint efforts between separate institutions demonstrated the advantages that our cohort could achieve through effective collaboration.

SUNY also reviewed the cooperative approach of the City University of New York (CUNY), which shares the VPATs they collect publicly so that other institutions can access this information.[15] Many institutions in SUNY actively lobbied for a repository of accessibility documentation, like the CUNY VPAT Repository,[16] which gathered and maintained VPATs and accessibility statements for commonly used vendors by the system.

SUNY's System Administration office modeled their approach to accessibility compliance on the California State University (CSU or Cal State) system's practices. The Cal State System's approach was designed to encourage cooperation among their campuses and to "collaboratively develop, manage, facilitate and support a wide range of common interest groups, affinity groups, communities of practice, CSU committees, and other recognized campus representative groups whose missions include or relate to accessible technologies."[17] SUNY also formed interest groups for online learning, web development, and accessibility coordination. However, the SLS office, which supports campus libraries, identified a mismatch between the Cal State System's approach and its application to SUNY, as many smaller SUNY institutions lack adequate staffing to participate in representative groups. These campuses and libraries would still need support related to accessibility.

The Cohort Advantage

SLS offers many centralized services, but chose to create a cohort for accessibility as there was a defined need to have a group of librarians who could participate in and advise on accessibility initiatives, as well as provide peer learning opportunities. SLS had developed communities of practice surrounding library technology, connected to a recent migration to a shared library technology platform.

A cohort "is a group of learners who proceed along the same educational journey together as a group."[18] Designed to honor the self-driven nature of the adult learner, the cohort model provides a structure in which social support can foster peer learning as individuals bond over time.[19] Cohort models can also cultivate leaders who guide organizational efforts to bring about transformational change.[20] Participants and organizations gain profound benefits from cohort models, including the creation of permanent communities of practice.

SUNY initially chose a closed cohort,[21] with all members beginning at the same time, to encourage peer learning. Providing adequate time and attention to group development activities, a closed cohort can become a community of practice (CoP),[22] which is defined by "three fundamental elements: a domain of knowledge, which defines a set of issues; a community of people who care about this domain; and the shared practice that they are developing to be effective in their domain."[23] These communities evolve over time as participants gain expertise through shared learning and knowledge refinement "out of the raw material of [members'] experiences."[24] Given the changing work demands faced by cohort members, membership ultimately did shift during the initial period, with several original members leaving and a few new members joining the cohort in process.

Due to the need to meet regularly during the pandemic, the cohort was virtual. Virtual cohorts can be a "safe confidential space outside our own organizations" for members, which is often helpful when new duties, knowledge areas, and processes are being reviewed and established.[25] When developing virtual groups, it is important for members to have a "shared similar experience" such as attending a conference or taking a course, and then to have enough similarity in functional roles to establish common ground but enough diversity in strengths and interests to have different perspectives.[26] Virtual cohorts provide members meaningful insights that are removed from a member's daily work and are from other organizations, providing useful perspective for everyone involved. Virtual cohorts can provide a safe exposure to topics that extends beyond intra-organizational experiences, but there are considerations that virtual cohorts should address. Virtual teams that are successful rely heavily on building trust in many ways—from "swift trust" based on "surface-level" understanding of each other—but trust should be multi-layered and multi-faceted, growing with time and shared experiences.[27] Virtual cohorts should also spend time at the outset to develop clear intentions of the group, agree on collaborative technology, agree on the structure of meetings, and come to consensus on the tasks and work of the group.[28] Because the group was a virtual cohort, there was extensive discussion at the beginning about technology used, development of activities and goals, creating shared experiences via webinars, and developing a structure for meetings and how collaborative work would be approached. Although virtual cohorts and virtual teams work best with clearly defined structure and goals, the group still left some room for flexibility on how members would gain expertise in accessibility.

Cohorts typically function best when the assigned learning prompts are semi-structured yet still flexible, with the cohort able to choose and pursue topics organically.[29] Successful cohorts should have explicit goals and expectations reinforced throughout the experience, with meaningful applied learning activities and some capstone experience.[30] The cohort's initial goals were to develop a shared accessibility compliance review process and to complete reviews for the most commonly subscribed

content across SUNY, while incorporating the learning experiences of creating reviews into the curriculum. As a final product, cohort members were expected to contribute reviews or to produce process and policy documentation.

Formation of the Cohort

Initial Cohort Plan

SLS provided a framework for our cohort's membership, intent, and initial meeting structure according to the principle framework laid out in "Virtual Cohorts: Peer Support and Problem-Solving at a Distance," published by *College & Research Libraries News*.[31] SLS staff developed a draft schedule for the Library Accessibility Cohort, including self-directed learning assignments and readings discussed at meetings. For each month, there were training activities, prompts for contributing to the group, readings, and assigned discussions. Since all SUNY employees had access to Deque University (an online learning platform with various accessibility-related courses and training), this was used throughout the first several months to build knowledge of specific topics relevant to the review of VPATs. In addition, we invited subject experts from SUNY and beyond and structured peer-to-peer learning activities. Bi-weekly meetings were then used to review training and to apply the content and skills covered in the assigned training.

As one of the major goals of the cohort was to create a central repository of reviews and testing of VPATs and products, the first six months of the cohort plan and training were focused on understanding VPATs, accessibility testing, and producing accessibility reviews. The cohort would then determine the direction it would take for the remaining six months. For the next phase, the cohort decided to concentrate on developing accessibility programs and reviewing best practices, with the main deliverable being a toolkit of accessibility resources that librarians could use both within the SUNY community and outside it.

Membership

As the cohort was brought together to work on issues that impact all SUNY institutions, it was important that the group's membership reflected the diversity of SUNY. Though some individual members have left the group and new members have joined, there has been a stable representation of all types of institutions within the SUNY system. The cohort included small libraries who had librarians who did not specialize in accessibility. To ensure that the system office heard feedback from the campuses, membership has also consistently included the SUNY System EIT accessibility officer and several SLS staff. The co-chairs worked closely with appropriate system office staff to set directions for the group. Although this diversity of representation allowed SUNY to review how the EIT policy was being implemented across different types of institutions, it did lead to challenges on setting directions for the cohort. Some librarians had enough capacity and institutional support to dedicate time to learn more about accessibility, while others did not. SUNY's approach to shared accessibility was different from other groups or institutions in that SUNY intentionally included librarians from a variety of backgrounds and campuses, not limiting to accessibility specialists, as this would test how reasonable

local accessibility reviewing would be across all types of campuses. However, including librarians with little background in accessibility did lead to some feeling overwhelmed by the work of the cohort. Individual contributions varied depending on the specific skills, experience, and job responsibilities of the member.

Means of Collaboration

From the start, it was clear that effective online communication and collaboration were critical to the cohort's success. Given that each SUNY campus uses different technologies and platforms, it was necessary to select tools that would work for all members while allowing the group to achieve its goals. The cohort adopted a SUNY-wide online platform to share comments, advice, meeting agendas, documents, and resources. For synchronous meetings, the cohort used Zoom for general video conferencing and smaller "breakout" groups. We also used Springshare's LibWizard and LibGuides platforms to create our database evaluation forms and the toolkit that publicly shares our work.

Building Community, Boundaries, and Ground Rules

An additional consideration of the cohort was the goal of building community. Given the disparate nature of the schools represented and the varied pressures faced by each member, SLS staff focused on continuity and determined collaboration would be more straightforward with co-chair leadership.

Consistent leadership by the co-chairs helped build a sense of community within the cohort. However, the start of the COVID-19 pandemic brought challenges, including increased workloads and the need to be "on" multiple times a day. While existing best practices stress the need for "speaking time equity" and a "mix of activities and discussion,"[32] participants often remained quiet and off-camera, perhaps due to "Zoom fatigue" or other factors. According to a survey by the American Library Association during this time, "more than half of college and research libraries had seen eliminations or reductions in planned hiring, professional development funding, print collection budgets, and program budgets," and it was likely that cohort members would face some, if not a combination, of these challenges and myriad personal issues.[33] Setting realistic boundaries helped inculcate a sense of community and support members as they tried to fit cohort activities into their workday.

On a personal level, members were often isolated and cut off from coworkers and family (save for web meetings), experiencing loss and fear of the unknown and health concerns. Additionally, some members had to combine work obligations with caregiving and assisting their children with online schooling. Part of our goal was to create a supportive environment where we could strike a balance, fully knowing that "homework" needed to be limited in scope and time requirements. Thus the chairs instituted a "half-hour rule" in which, aside from VPAT reviews, homework and prep for meetings should take no longer than thrity minutes. During meetings, we also took time to check-in with each other, which was sometimes a time management challenge, but essential for cultivating a supportive team environment.

Fostering Deep Collaboration

Another advantage of this structure was that it ensured that it gave each member of the cohort ownership over the group's direction and helped to foster a commitment to our work. In this way, the cohort was able to develop a "deep collaboration" as defined by Valerie Horton: "two or more people or organizations contributing substantial levels of personal or organizational commitment, including shared authority, joint responsibility, and robust resources allocation, to achieve a common or mutually-beneficial goal."[34] From the start, the work done by the SLS team ensured that the cohort had a strong charge that was understood by all members as a mutually-beneficial goal. Moreover, as a cohort of librarians led by two librarians, all members had an opportunity to contribute equally to setting priorities in how to achieve this common goal and in deciding which elements were key to the reviews. This created an environment of shared authority and responsibility that deepened our collaboration while simultaneously ensuring that our reviews would be useful across SUNY and that our process could be implemented at a wide range of types of libraries. By asking that all members contribute to the output of the group, we ensured that there was a time commitment from all participants that guaranteed buy-in and also prevented any members from feeling as though not all other members were contributing equitably.

Support Mechanisms

The thrust of many of our discussions centered around reducing individual insecurity around accessibility, disability inclusion, and how to test for potential barriers. Only when we acknowledged this insecurity and built a shared culture of support for learning did we feel our cohort could collaborate honestly and openly ask the questions needed to expand our understanding of existing barriers for people with disabilities. This was particularly relevant since research suggests that many library professionals feel unprepared to complete accessibility tasks. A recent survey by J. J. Pionke found that "training in all things accessibility and disability was an area that respondents expressed frustration with because of the complete lack of, or inadequacy of, needed training."[35] As Erin McAfee notes in her research on student reactions to reference interviews:

> Absorbing new ideas and information requires an awareness that one's own knowledge is either incorrect or lacking, therefore we must devalue our own knowledge if we are to accept new information. For many people, this threat or devaluation (normal shame) is embraced as a challenge. For others, the feeling is misidentified as incompetence or stupidity, which produces more shame. This is how shame becomes compounded and destructive.[36]

Clearly, McAfee's observations can apply to anyone with a knowledge gap. Armed with this understanding that many librarians feel that their accessibility expertise is lacking and that such situations can cause destructive feelings of shame to emerge, it was imperative that we prevent shame from developing by creating an environment where cohort members could accept new information. For this to succeed, support for learning needed to be central to our work. To build the supportive group culture we needed, we focused on the related topics of trust and vulnerability. As Brené Brown writes, "Trust is the stacking and layering of small moments and reciprocal vulnerability

over time,"[37] so the cohort was designed to encourage the ongoing construction of trust and sharing of vulnerability. However, this was a challenge given the particular difficulty of developing trust in virtual cohorts.[38] Virtual teams struggle to create trust and confidence when members have disparate technical backgrounds.[39] Recognizing that both are vital for them to function and thrive, our leadership focused on shared experiential learning, often by immersive in-person meetings, which the literature demonstrates is crucial for virtual teams.[40] Since many of us did not know each other prior to joining the cohort, we took time to get to know one another and share our personal and campus needs and interests. We focused on encouraging members, including the co-chairs, to share when they had questions or were unsure about a topic. Each member also shared resources they found when seeking answers to their own questions about topics covered. We also paired up on training assignments and database evaluation so that cohort members could work with another cohort member repeatedly to develop a strong working relationship.

As members began as relative novices in accessibility, concerns arose regarding confidence as individuals felt they were not yet qualified to evaluate resources. The group experienced difficulty meeting deadlines for reviews, completing assigned readings, and feeling confident that they had the necessary background to understand digital accessibility. Facing these challenges, the group adjusted schedules several times, and participation was initially uneven. The cohort aimed to build greater confidence by adding one-on-one virtual mentoring for those needing more support, with SLS staff playing a pivotal role. However, the development of trust remained a challenge and building the confidence of members in accessibility reviewing proved to be a persistent challenge.

We deviated from the overarching plan, or the meeting agendas as needed, when check ins revealed questions or stressors which could be addressed by the collaborators. Cohorts generally require members to dedicate significant time,[41] which was particularly challenging for many participants due to the new challenges and demands they faced in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, digital accessibility is a highly specialized field with many important skills and competencies associated with it, from knowledge of accessibility standards to the use of specialized assistive technologies for hands-on testing.[42] Most members were unable to devote the time needed to become experts in this field. It was important that the cohort recognized this and developed an approach that was manageable for librarians adding this work to already full job descriptions. Trust and a supportive culture within the cohort remained a priority. In addition to the paired assignments mentioned earlier, we also established priorities, boundaries, and clear expectations to help members engage with tasks in a way that was less overwhelming or stressful, all of which were directly intended to avoid exacerbating feelings of incompetence or failure that could lead to destructive feelings of shame.

Professional Development

As members came into the cohort with varying levels of expertise, building their collective knowledge around digital accessibility was a critical first stage. For the first two months of the cohort, significant time was dedicated to attending training programs, reviewing online resources, and viewing demonstrations of assistive technologies and other relevant tools. Though SLS staff provided

a draft schedule for the cohort's initial training, members also shared their favorite resources. Information about these materials was discussed in meetings and posted in online discussions, with some components ending up in the toolkit. In addition, members became familiar with the SUNY Accessibility Standards and their local EIT plans.

During this period, SUNY System Administration provided system-wide access to Deque University training modules. Cohort members were asked to complete relevant modules like "Web Accessibility Testing: Basic Methods and Tools" as well as "Web Accessibility Testing: Screen Readers." These modules covered the best practices, tools, and approaches for online accessibility testing. Completing these training modules ensured all cohort members had a comparable baseline knowledge of web accessibility standards, accessibility testing methods, and assistive technology tools. The training modules are broken up by subject, include a mix of text and video content, and allow participants to earn certificates for successfully completing the exercises and quizzes. Deque University, which other libraries have used to provide training for both staff and student workers,[43] proved to be an effective tool for the cohort, as evidenced by the increase in both knowledge and confidence around web accessibility testing upon completion of the modules. Several members ultimately recommended Deque modules to faculty and staff at their institutions after gaining experience with the platform. Even after this initial onboarding period, continuous professional development was critical to attaining an understanding of digital accessibility.

The Review Process

Collecting VPATs

At SUNY, VPATs were immediately identified as a valuable tool in identifying accessibility concerns because our EIT Policy explicitly states that "system Administration and campuses shall develop, purchase, host, and/or acquire, to the extent feasible, web pages, websites, hardware and software products and services that are accessible to persons with disabilities."[44] As accessibility testing in libraries becomes more common, there is an increasing awareness among database vendors about the importance of VPATs and the resulting resources accelerated our efforts to meet EIT goals.

While some SUNY libraries were beginning to review VPATs as part of the procurement process, few had documented methods that could be efficiently replicated or shared with other libraries interested in starting this work. SUNY considered partnering with an accessibility vendor for product testing and reviews, an arrangement the Library Accessibility Alliance employed, but the cost of reviewing approximately seventy-five to one hundred products made this out of our reach. Rather than relying on an external vendor for auditing, the cohort members evaluated the products and created a central repository of accessibility reviews, which helped us develop internal expertise. It is important to note that some larger institutions had already conducted accessibility reviews as part of their purchasing processes. To reduce duplication, SUNY needed to establish a central repository of reviews and agreed-upon practices. We decided to interview the larger SUNY institutions and devise assessment methods

that would meet their requirements, with the understanding that smaller campuses would also accept these reviews.

As many SUNY institutions subscribe to the same databases, focusing on VPATs helped to standardize workflows and eliminate unnecessary work. VPATs could be shared between institutions, and once evaluations were completed, we could make them available to the SUNY library community. These evaluations would follow a familiar structure that many e-resources and collection development librarians already knew about and understood.

Once the decision was made to focus on VPATs, the SLS team began by collecting and checking VPATs. In cases where these documents were older than two years or reflected legacy platforms, they consulted with vendors to obtain the latest VPAT or, when no up-to-date version was available, to encourage them to create a new one. If the vendor already had accessibility as a priority, they typically responded meaningfully and provided updated compliance documentation and took accessibility input seriously. However, other vendors, especially those offering specialized materials such as small journals, did not always have enough knowledge to meaningfully respond. Because of these mixed results, the cohort decided to develop testing methodologies that did not require a vendor-provided VPAT. The collected VPATs were organized on a password-protected website built using Springshare's LibGuides platform. One of the early tasks of the cohort was to look through this collection and become more familiar with the template and the range of ways vendors describe their products' accessibility features and known issues. The collection included VPATs that fell across a wide spectrum of detail and incorporated both VPATs created by the vendor and those created by third party evaluators. The aim was to ensure that all cohort members were acquainted with detailed VPATs and more brief examples.

After the VPATs were collected and organized, the next step was to develop a process for evaluating them. The evaluation consisted of a standard series of tests that would help to determine whether individual testing by cohort members would produce the same results described in the VPAT. This assessment would demonstrate how accurate the VPAT was, provide opportunities to understand what barriers users may encounter and how to work around them, and identify changes to the platform since the date of the VPAT. A fundamental feature was establishing a systematic way for evaluating VPATs, which assists members in completing the same steps so that accessibility reviews are more manageable for non-expert reviewers. To help ensure that each VPAT was evaluated in the same manner and to organize the information, the cohort developed forms that could be filled out at each stage of the evaluation to track findings and remind the reviewer of the steps required.

Developing the Forms[45]

The process of developing VPAT review forms was highly collaborative and iterative. Initially, this was envisioned as a single form. The cohort first discussed how the form would be most useful. However, by the time the cohort created the form, many members expressed that they did not have enough time to participate fully. In light of this, the cohort decided to deconstruct the evaluation process into manageable elements and two streamlined forms. To develop the forms, the cohort looked to both the existing structure of the VPAT and WCAG 2.1 success criteria. The questions were designed

to be approachable for those who were new to accessibility testing and to avoid overly subjective determinations. For this reason, many of the questions are designed with only Yes or No options along with a space for additional notes where needed. In designing the forms, we were also aware of the limited time many members had to devote to this work, so we focused on questions that could be answered relatively quickly and included the estimated time to complete each section of the form. The first form focused on a high-level review of the VPAT itself to determine basic information, such as currency, thoroughness, and level of commitment to accessibility compliance at an adequate WCAG level.[46] The second form focuses on WCAG's four principles of accessibility, which state that content should be perceivable, operable, understandable, and robust.[47] Splitting the forms in this way made it easier for busy cohort members to complete each segment of the review separately. We quickly realized this could be valuable for cohort members and others who adopt this workflow.

Once the general content of the forms was drafted, the cohort spent multiple meetings deciding how to clearly word the questions so that they would be user-friendly for non-cohort members in the future. This process involved detailed conversations about the wording of each question and what actions the evaluator would be expected to complete before answering. Cohort members then used the forms to evaluate the same database VPAT, normalizing results and discussing questions where there were significant differences in their understandings and responses. After this review was completed, the cohort came together again to talk through the results and refine the forms further.

Each cohort member had an opportunity to offer feedback on the forms at multiple points in their development, leading to improved usability and standardized results. Moreover, because the cohort members had varying levels of experience with accessibility evaluation, this process also ensured that the forms were robust enough to be used by both experts and novices. We designed questions so that all necessary information would be provided, including (as relevant) definitions, suggested tools, and examples. Incorporating this supplementary information ensures that the document can be used by those at all levels of experience, which CUNY also found useful in creating its own analogous resource.[48]

Given the cohort's focus on community, the VPAT review process needed to incorporate a distributed collaborative "DIY" approach. At first, cohort members worked together to create questions and were given short sections of the forms to test. Once they were more fully fleshed out, collaborators were paired up to trial the process, learn from each other, and improve the questions. Working in tandem allowed team members to fill the gaps in confidence and experience with a low-stakes starting place from which we could build. A template for narrative summaries was also developed for members to follow after filling out the forms to aid them in constructing a narrative for their reviews.

Despite this supportive environment, cohort members consistently reported that they were not confident enough to conduct reviews that would be used by other SUNY campuses. Though each review was primarily conducted by one individual, to build reviewer confidence, the cohort and SLS scheduled sessions with individuals to guide them through the process of testing and evaluating. These sessions led to the creation of many reviews, though cohort leaders observed that only about one of every three

cohort members ultimately gained the confidence needed to complete a review independently. Despite these challenges, during the cohort's first year, we completed and shared over fifty of these reviews.

Best Practices

The cohort leaders learned that novices require intensive modeling and mentorship to grow comfortable enough to complete conformance reviews and testing independently. Thus it would be better to have very small groups with frequent practice and a tight schedule as opposed to a cohort that is more self-directed and spans a longer timeframe.

Sharing resources and expertise can result in profound innovation and long-term benefits.[49] As a best practice, a library consortium would provide participants with adequate time off from their institutions to focus on conducting accessibility reviews. Having time to devote to the project's tasks is critical for "deep collaboration."[50] When a consortium's objective is to conduct reviews quickly and efficiently rather than to facilitate professional development, it would be advisable for participants to have a solid understanding of digital accessibility standards and testing before starting this work. If the participants do not already have these skills, it is necessary to set aside dedicated time to develop them at the beginning of the project.

Since the cohort could not bring about an increased level of comfort conducting reviews, it divided its focus, with some developing best practices and a toolkit, while others honed their skills in performing the reviews.

Sharing The Cohort's Work

The toolkit concept was modeled after the Library Accessibility Alliance, and with the spirit that "significant progress happens when libraries collaborate."[51] The SUNY Library Procurement Accessibility Toolkit, which contains a number of resources, enables librarians involved in negotiations and renewals of digital resources to advocate for accessibility improvements.[52] Collaboration was essential in ensuring that the cohort understood the needs of the SUNY system and the variety of ways libraries handled vendor relationships, especially in the cases of smaller institutions that we knew would need these tools the most. The toolkit also facilitates establishing local processes, awareness, skills, thereby promoting a culture of accessibility within SUNY libraries.

The unique procurement focus of the toolkit distinguishes it from other prominent consortia toolkits, such as CUNY's and the Library Accessibility Alliance.[53] There are many useful features of the toolkit, including the vendor communication and advocacy email templates for standard scenarios encountered when requesting and evaluating accessibility documentation. As a result, librarians can reuse and adapt these model communications to their specific needs, saving time and reducing redundant work. Because the cohort found that a major barrier to accessibility work was the perception by individual librarians that they lacked expertise or did not know where to start with accessibility reviews, the toolkit resources are designed to lower barriers to much of this work. Using the templates, librarians can track compliance and accountability with vendors. Of equal value are the sample accessibility

plans, forms, and processes included in the toolkit. The cohort plans to update the toolkit regularly to ensure relevancy and usefulness. One of the additions is a rubric intended to assist SUNY libraries in determining when to request procurement exceptions if products have accessibility issues but the institution still wishes to purchase them. Documents such as these help identify risks and rank the most critical barriers to access. This rating system will further assist SUNY librarians in determining whether or not a product is accessible and if there is sufficient benefit or a clear accessibility roadmap to justify a purchase.[54]

Ongoing Work

Though the cohort was originally planned as a one-year commitment, many members wished to continue the group and focus on library accessibility more generally. In 2021–2022, members planned to consider e-books and collection development, hardware and software support, and/or physical library spaces. Though members may not be creating policies and documentation related to these topics as yet, the cohort will remain the primary space for discussing accessibility topics for SUNY librarians.

Moving forward, the cohort plans to meet monthly and bring in outside guests to facilitate instruction and discussion where necessary. As the cohort's efforts persist, members hope that their growing distributed expertise and promotion of accessibility work within their institutions will continue to inform more widespread adoption of accessibility best practices across SUNY libraries.

Conclusion: Implications for Other Institutions and Future Research

Our work offers several lessons for those interested in conducting accessibility reviews and building collaborative cohorts. We validated that a collaborative approach to accessibility helps build confidence and improve outcomes. We found it invaluable to have a group of individuals from diverse institutional and technical backgrounds in conversation with one another throughout our work. We had varying perspectives and experiences with a range of workflows, library functional areas, and campus structures. Working through these topics together led to useful discussions, strengthening our approach to database reviews and the development of model documentation. Consequently, our output became more widely applicable to colleges and universities of all sizes. It is beneficial for other organizations to build partnerships with a diverse range of institutions, not just similar ones. The key to the success of this project was the inclusion of a wide variety of perspectives.

Furthermore, our group supported one another, offering encouragement and suggestions while we all built our skills in accessibility testing and electronic resource review. The cohort approach was crucial in overcoming the stress and uncertainty of developing skills in an area new to many participants, ensuring that participants were ready and able to learn this new information. Without this framework of mutual support, acquiring expertise and experience around web accessibility would have been significantly more difficult, time-consuming, and costly for group members. Our experience provides examples of how this work can be done when members cannot meet in person, due to geographic

distance or other constraints. Establishing a learning cohort focused on accessibility auditing or any other topic is an effective way to build a supportive community of practice for professional growth.

We also identified areas for further research. While we were cognizant of Pionke's observations and McAfee's concerns regarding misidentified feelings of incompetence which might lead users to feel shame or inadequacy around developing these new skills, as discussed in the "Support Mechanisms" section above, we did not formally measure these feelings or the quantitative impact of our approach. A study specifically focused on the role of shame in the professional development process within a collaborative cohort, similar to this one, could directly study this topic and, perhaps, validate best practices. Additionally, this paper primarily focuses on the early stages of a cohort, but future research on the sustainability of such efforts, particularly in light of competing work demands, could provide valuable insights for those interested in developing an ongoing solution for this work.

Acknowledgment

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Notes

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Appendix

Form 1

VPAT Review

Reviewer name: (required)

Reviewer's Email Address (required)

Date you reviewed: (required)

Vendor name: (required)

Product name(s): (required)

Scope of product? E.g., e-book package? Streaming video?

Date on VPAT (if no day of the month choose the first day): (required)

Was the VPAT completed within the last 1–2 years? (required)

- Yes
- No

Notes:

Is VPAT current version (2.0+)? (required)

- Yes
- No

Version notes:

Who completed the VPAT? (required)

- Vendor
- 3rd Party (note name):

Do conformance levels have specific documenting evidence, not just "supports"? (required)

- Yes
- No

Documenting notes:

Are remarks and explanations thorough? (required)

- Yes
- No

Remarks notes:

Is an Accessibility Roadmap available on the vendor's website? (required)

- Yes
- No

Roadmap notes:

Does the VPAT describe their testing methodologies? (required)

- Yes
- No

Testing tools used (if applicable) or other notes:

Does the VPAT provide a contact person for accessibility? (required)

- Yes
- No

Contact notes:

Has VPAT or site been reviewed by other consortium or group within last year?

- Yes
- No

Review notes including reviews and link if possible:

Anything else you'd like to add? Any follow-up questions for the vendor?

Form 2

Methodology Tasks Based on ITAG[55]

Your name (required)

Email (required)

Vendor: (required)

Product(s): (required)

Text Alternatives

Is there alt text for images, graphs, charts, etc.? Using browser-based developer tools or WAVE, review 5-6 different images across a range of photos, graphs, charts, etc. Time estimate: 5 mins.

Is alt-text present?

- Yes
- No

Is alt-text sufficiently clear?

- Yes
- No

Alt-text notes:

Captions, Audio Descriptions, and Transcripts

Manually check for captions and audio descriptions. Review 3–4 videos or audio files. Time estimate: 5 mins.

Are files captioned?

- Yes
- No

Are descriptions accurate?

- Yes
- No

Captions notes:

Adaptable

How does the product accommodate screen readers for low or no vision individuals? Use WAVE; VoiceOver; JAWS; or NVDA to run automated test AND use a screen reader to navigate through the product. Time estimate: 10 mins.

Does the product work with screenreaders?

- Yes
- No

Adaptable notes:

Distinguishable

Use Paciello Color Contrast Analyzer to check for color contrast on the main page, search results, and a sample item. Product should meet WCAG 2.0 AA standards. Time estimate: 5 mins.

Is the color contrast sufficient?

- Yes
- No

Is there enough color contrast to tell when a change has happened?

- Yes
- No

Distinguishable notes:

Navigable and Keyboard Support

Must be able to navigate page with keyboard only. To fulfill this requirement, navigation via the keyboard (i.e., tab and arrow keys) must be logical. Features such as visual focus indicators and good heading structure are required. Use your keyboard to test with basic keyboard navigation (tab, shift+tab, arrows, escape, space bar, enter). Time estimate: 10 mins.

Can site be navigated using keyboard keys?

- Yes
- No

Is navigation logical?

- Yes
- No

Are there visual focus indicators?

- Yes
- No

Was good heading structure used?

- Yes
- No

Navigable notes:

Seizures

Review Product to see if there is media that would potentially flash. If so, refer to another group member or check with Photosensitive Epilepsy Analysis Tool from University of Maryland. Time estimate: 5 mins.

Is there content on the site that could cause seizures?

- Yes
- No

Seizures notes:

Predictable

Review how the proposed product appears and operates in predictable and consistent ways by navigating between pages and check menu/breadcrumb consistency. Review all search tools and facets for consistency. Time estimate: 10 mins.

Is the product predictable?

- Yes
- No

Predictable notes:

Input Assistance

The proposed product should assist users to avoid, identify and correct mistakes with mechanisms that must be perceivable to users who have visual and/or hearing impairments. Use WAVE and manual review to check to see if sufficient instructional cues, unambiguous error messages and other mechanisms that alert users to mistakes or help them avoid mistakes are present. Navigate to major inputs (search boxes, feedback forms, customer support tools, etc.) and test error responses. (See Understanding WCAG 2.0 Guideline 3.3) Estimated time: 0 mins.

Are input assistance mechanisms perceivable to users who have visual and/or hearing impairments?

- Yes
- No

Input assistance notes:

Robustness and Compatibility

The proposed product should work with a variety of assistive technologies. To fulfill this requirement, users must not be required to use a particular operating system (if applicable), web browser (with reasonable limitations on version compatibility), or assistive technology. The product must utilize programming standards and ensure that the name, role, and value of each interface element can be programmatically determined. Review any browser/technology restrictions listed for the product; navigate to main page and search results in multiple browsers; run automated test with WAVE. Time estimate: 5 mins.

Is the product robust and compatible?

- Yes
- No

Robust and compatible notes:

Summary

Any additional notes? Any additional features that enhance accessibility, e.g., read aloud tool?