

A New Accessibility Plan for Affordable Learning Georgia

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Abstract

Affordable Learning Georgia (ALG) was established in 2014 to reduce the cost of textbooks to students. Originally, the pilot team pictured ALG's flagship program, Textbook Transformation Grants, to largely focus on the adoption of existing open educational resources (OER), but this program surprisingly led to the creation of many new open resources. In addition, ALG partnered with the University of North Georgia (UNG) Press to create new peer-reviewed open textbooks for highly enrolled courses where such open textbooks did not exist.

Even with required accessibility training and UNG Press compliance with university press accessibility standards, most of these resources did not arrive in an accessible format, so ALG needed to develop a plan to amend previous resources for accessibility and guide faculty and staff in creating accessible materials moving forward. This case study outlines six actions in Affordable Learning Georgia's new accessibility plan, along with providing new accessible textbooks and templates which resulted from the initial work on this ongoing project.

Introduction

Giving full creative freedom to grantees, along with a reliance on partnerships for accessibility training, left Affordable Learning Georgia (ALG) with inaccessible digital materials. How could ALG make both its past and its future more accessible?

Affordable Learning Georgia was established in 2014 to reduce the cost of textbooks to students within the University System of Georgia (USG). USG institutions are largely independent from each other; while the Board of Regents (BOR) provides guidelines and policies, academic departments at each institution are trusted to be the experts on their own subjects and to guide the development

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of their own curricula. Because of this, ALG acts as a support initiative, avoiding mandates as much as it possibly can.

Originally, ALG's pilot team pictured its flagship program, Textbook Transformation Grants (which are now called Affordable Materials Grants), to largely focus on the adoption of existing open educational resources (OER) by teams of faculty and staff volunteering to do the extra work necessary to implement these resources. Keeping academic and creative freedom in mind, our grants would support the team members' time, but the plans and the content were mostly the responsibility of the teams themselves. Surprisingly, even the first rounds of grants led to the creation of many new open resources by these teams. Despite ALG implementing required accessibility training for all grantees through a partner organization, many of these resources did not arrive in a format that would be deemed accessible by digital learners.

In addition, ALG partnered with the University of North Georgia (UNG) Press to create new peer-reviewed open textbooks for highly-enrolled courses where such open textbooks did not exist. The UNG Press, through a pilot project which started in 2011, created the first USG-wide open textbook for US History I, and published it in 2013 in partnership with the Office for Faculty Development in the USG. While copyright management and open licensing were clear in this creation process, digital accessibility features were not: the UNG Press had previous experience in creating print materials using Adobe InDesign, and the results were open textbooks which were machine-readable, with captions serving as alt-text for images, but they did not contain proper document structure.

ALG needed a plan to both amend previous resources for accessibility and guide faculty and staff in creating accessible materials moving forward. This case study outlines two challenges which led to ALG's new accessibility plan, along with the objective to meet each challenge and three actions taken per objective to reach the goal of a more accessible ALG.

Challenges Addressed

Challenge 1: An Accessibility Backlog

Affordable Learning Georgia (ALG) was established in 2014 to reduce the cost of textbooks to students; originally, the pilot team pictured its flagship program, Textbook Transformation Grants, to largely focus on the adoption of existing open educational resources (OER). Once the first round of grants reached their final

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semesters, this proved to be wrong: many grant teams had created their own resources, and these state funds-supported resources needed to be open-licensed and shared with the public. In addition, ALG partnered with the [University of North Georgia \(UNG\) Press](#) to create new peer-reviewed open textbooks for highly-enrolled courses where such open textbooks did not exist. While this ensured a high-quality textbook, these were created in a traditional press style, intended for print.

Both the Textbook Transformation Grants materials and the UNG Press materials were first hosted on various campus websites and free hosting options such as [MERLOT Content Builder](#) and [OER Commons OpenAuthor](#) until the [GALILEO Open Learning Materials](#) repository was established in 2016. While an accessibility organization provided training at the grantees' Kickoff Meetings and the UNG Press followed university press accessibility guidelines, these were not accessible enough for the general public as we framed these materials as globally-available open educational resources. Faculty-created resources were largely in Word or PDF formats with no document structure, alternative text, or accessible hyperlinks.

Affordable Learning Georgia aims to share all created open materials from its partnerships and grants globally, and in order to provide equitable access to these materials, these must consistently have screen reader-ready text, clear and navigable heading structures, accessible tables and charts, and alternative text descriptions for images.

Objective

ALG needed to address the substantive backlog of previously-created materials with little to no accessibility.

Action 1: CIDI Accessibility Audit and Amendment of Existing Textbooks

The Center for Inclusive Design and Innovation (CIDI), the USG's partner for Disability Services accessible materials requests, audited all ALG open textbooks and the most-used ancillary materials in order to establish a baseline of screen-reader accessibility. This project resulted in all ALG textbooks having at least optical character recognition (OCR) and auto-tagging on all PDFs. This did not establish further accessibility measures, however, including structured documents and alt text.

Action 2: ALG Internal Accessibility Audit of Grant-Created Materials

With the help of Tiffani Tijerina as Program Manager, ALG is now undergoing its own audit and revision of all grant project-created OER. Some resources have been revised in-house and others will be revised in-depth by the University of North Georgia Press. ALG is currently planning to hire a student worker to help make previous OER more accessible and available in Manifold.

Action 3: Partnering with UNG Press to Create Manifold-Ready Accessible Texts

A new partnership with the UNG Press allows the Press to create accessible, Manifold-ready versions of their textbooks with the help of Ms. Tijerina and funding for the time it takes to create these versions. The UNG Press is planning on creating one accessible textbook per month in Fiscal 2021.

Challenge 2: Faculty Time and Training for Future Accessibility

ALG's Textbook Transformation Grants are based on giving teams of faculty and staff as much agency and freedom as possible to implement and/or create the materials needed for their specific courses, but this led to major inconsistencies in accessibility. Due to the output of OER from previous years of Textbook Transformation Grants, ALG staff knew that a training block at the Kickoff Meeting was not enough to yield accessible materials at the end of grant projects. ALG has always been a small organization in terms of personnel; no more than 2 people have worked on the initiative full-time since its inception. Having dedicated accessibility staff would not be possible with this lean personnel structure.

Multiple options for increasing the accessibility of grant project deliverables were considered:

- Increasing accessibility training for grantees, including extra webinars throughout the process
- Increasing accessibility training through an online course which could validate completion
- An accessibility audit pass-through before any Final Report is accepted; the audit results would be sent back to grantees, and they would then make revisions and re-submit if needed
- Establishment of one required platform to create all OER where accessibility is integrated into the documents by default; training in order for faculty to effectively use the platform

These options were found to create too much of a time burden on the faculty and staff within grant teams; Textbook Transformation Grants were established to cover the extra time it takes to implement OER in a course, and adding these requirements would consume much of that time.

Objective

ALG needed to increase the accessibility of newly-created materials in a way which still allowed faculty the freedom and time to create these materials.

Action 1: Participation in Manifold Digital Services Pilot

Within the review, ALG reached out to other OER-focused organizations and leaders, and one standout recommendation was a new partnership between the University of Minnesota Press, the City University of New York (CUNY), and Cast Iron Coding; a new open-source book publishing platform called Manifold. Manifold is focused on ingesting static files such as Word documents and EPUB and converting them to web-readable, accessible, and structured texts. Manifold enables readers to highlight and annotate each text privately, in closed groups, and publicly, and accessibility features include font size and style adjustment, dark mode, structured text, and a responsive design for any device. ALG applied to participate in the pilot with the intention of bringing all ALG open textbooks into Manifold and was accepted as part of the pilot group.

Action 2: Establishing Accessible OER Templates for Manifold

Ms. Tijerina authored a single-document Word template with directions on how to create an accessible resource in Microsoft Word. This will allow grantees to more easily create both accessible and Manifold-ready texts. More templates will be created throughout the year.

Action 3: Authoring Faculty-Centered Accessibility Guides

Ms. Tijerina authored a set of ALG accessibility guides to assist faculty authors in creating OER. These guides intentionally avoid legal and in-depth accessibility terminology in favor of guiding faculty through common platforms such as Microsoft Word in creating accessible documents. Topics include:

- Document Design
- Alt Text
- Captioning and Transcripts
- PowerPoint
- Accessibility Checkers

In addition, ALG now has an [Accessibility Checklist](#) for created OER.

Results

ALG's new Accessibility Plan is just getting started, but the following deliverables are early indicators of a successful ongoing accessibility effort:

New Accessible Textbooks in Manifold

UNG Press Revised Textbooks

The following textbooks were revised through the partnership between Affordable Learning Georgia and the University of North Georgia Press.

- [British Literature II Anthology](#)
- [Introduction to Art](#)
- [Understanding Music](#)
- [World History: Cultures, States, and Societies to 1500](#)
- [Writing the Nation](#)

Grant-Created Revised Textbooks

The following textbooks were revised through our internal accessibility audit and in-house accessibility revisions.

- [Arts Integration in Elementary Curriculum, 2nd Edition](#)
- [Exploring Public Speaking, 4th Edition](#)
- [Microbiology for Allied Health Students](#)
- [Open Technical Communication](#)

Grant-Created Original Textbooks

The following textbooks are original creations by newer grant teams with an accessible document structure and Manifold ingestion.

- [American History I](#)
- [Film Appreciation](#)
- [Global Business](#)
- [Programming Fundamentals](#)

New Faculty Development Materials on Accessibility

The following materials were developed by Tiffani Tijerina as guides for faculty authors in creating accessible open content.

- [ALG Accessibility Guides \(CC BY 4.0\)](#)
- [ALG Single-Document Word Template \(CC BY 4.0\)](#)

Conclusions

Lessons Learned

- **Support Creators Beyond Workshops and Training:** Emphasizing accessibility when creating new open content was a priority from the inception of Affordable Learning Georgia in 2014. However, balancing the maintenance of instructors' academic and creative freedom with prescribing accessibility measures for open content creation proved difficult, particularly when accessible open textbook platforms such as Manifold did not exist. This resulted in limited accessibility support; namely, training provided by CIDI at each grant round's Kick-Off Meeting. New OER initiatives should not only provide training, but also templates and platforms which make accessible creation simple and usable from the outset.
- **OER Supporters Can Be Basic Accessibility "Experts:"** Affordable Learning Georgia, similar to many government initiatives, started out by leveraging partnerships between departments that seemed better suited for particular tasks. This resulted in a partnership with an accessibility organization which deferred training and revisions only to them; this proved unsustainable in the long run. OER instructional designers, librarians, faculty, and administrators should educate themselves on how to create basic accessible content in various platforms. Even though accessibility does have a legal component in the United States, that legal component should not limit OER initiatives from providing basic training and support as the local accessible content creation "expert."
- **Start With Realistic Goals:** Accessibility is not one easy-to-understand set of criteria for all types of resources; it is a spectrum of criteria for providing access to information to people with a diverse range of abilities. Instead of trying to address every ability possible with a long list of possibly infeasible accessibility requirements, start by addressing basic requirements which make resources more accessible to the most learners: structured headings in word processor documents, alt text in images, captions and transcripts in videos, and appropriate reading order in presentation slides, for instance. Some less frequent but necessary accessibility accommodations, such as Braille printouts for textbooks or audio description for videos, may need to be addressed on a more traditional case-by-case basis for resource and cost purposes.

Next Steps

- **New Strategic Plan:** Affordable Learning Georgia's new Strategic Plan for 2022-2025 will include a permanent set of guiding principles prioritizing accessibility and inclusion.
- **Continue Accessibility Plan and Balance COVID-19 Work:** Extra tasks, such as moving all events online and managing grant teams encountering more emergency situations than normal, have arisen during the COVID-19 pandemic. Along with these new tasks and priorities, ALG will continue to revise previously-existing and newly-created OER for accessibility moving forward.
- **Require Accessibility in Grants Request For Proposals (RFP):** Now that ALG provides more training and platform support for accessible open content, newly-created OER through our grants are now required to be accessible per our RFP and application.