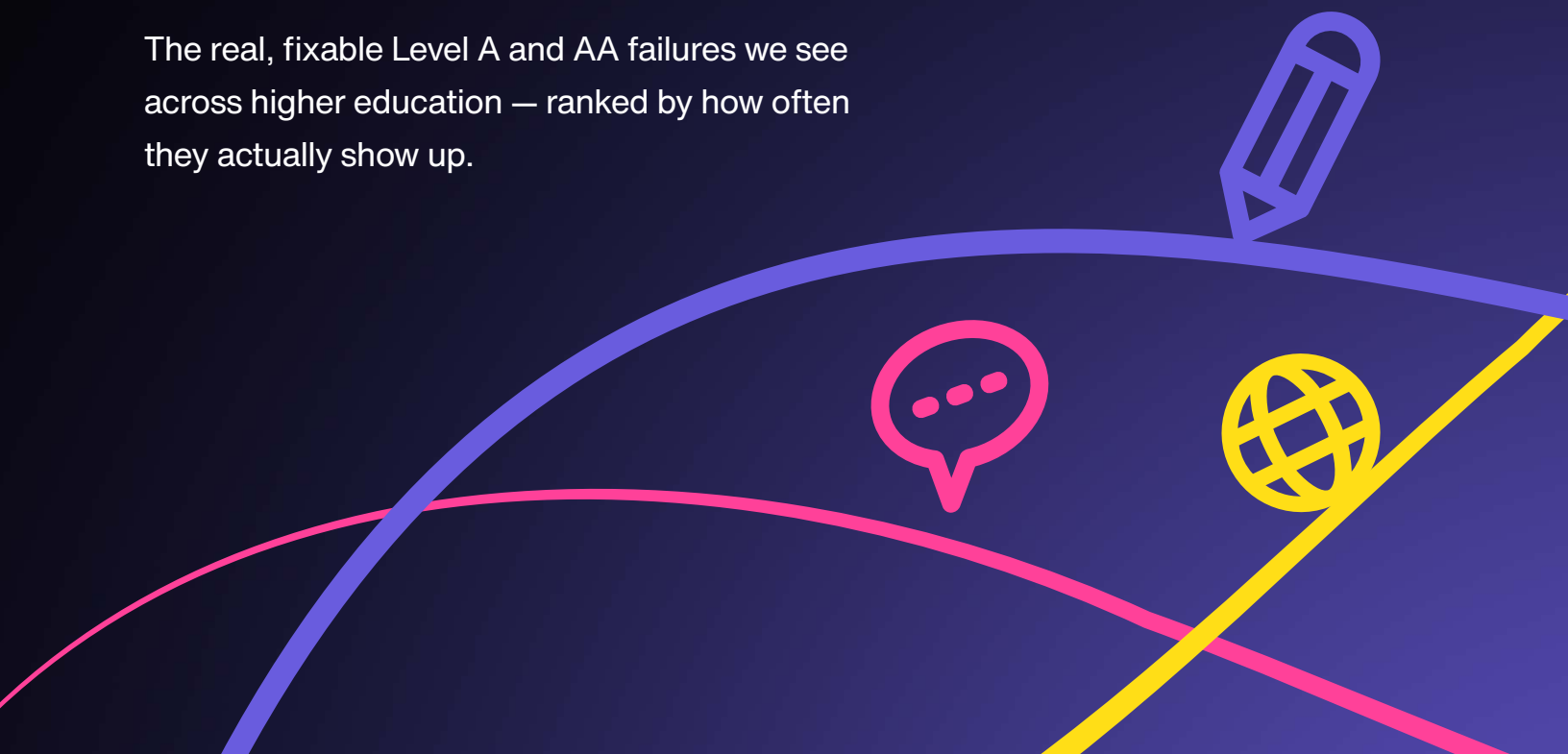


17/

Most common ways higher education fails WCAG 2.1

The real, fixable Level A and AA failures we see across higher education — ranked by how often they actually show up.



You already know your website isn't perfect/

Let me paint a picture: One day, you woke up with an inherited CMS, a few thousand pages, enough PDFs to jam every printer in the world, and a backlog that quietly resets itself every time someone in a department hits “publish.”

A backlog that got longer in the few brief moments you took to read this paragraph. There are issues everywhere, and never enough time, money, or people to handle them. And yes, many of those issues are accessibility issues.

That's not a dig. It's the job. There are accessibility issues on every university website.

We should know— we checked. Accessibility isn't a thing you finish, it's a moving target you chase while doing nine other things. The standards get stricter, the site keeps growing, and “we'll fix it next sprint” becomes next quarter becomes next year. Nobody's caught up. **You're not behind; you're normal.**

But the people who can't use your site aren't a rounding error: they're people. A student using a screen reader to fill in a financial aid form, someone navigating with a keyboard, a parent zooming in on their phone. When the site fails them, it's not a glitch. It's the inability to access what they need. A poor experience that can quickly turn into more than just a scathing review. The Department of Justice's updated **Title II rule makes WCAG 2.1 AA the legal standard** for public colleges and universities, and even though that timeline has been extended, your website is still being used by people who need it to be accessible. Chances are, I didn't have to paint the picture. It's one you're already all too familiar with.



“People who can't use your website aren't a rounding error. They're people.”

About the Data

We scan 1,838 US higher education websites every month. We don't do it to shame or attack anyone. In fact, we only highlight the people doing well in the index.

We do it so that we can keep a pulse on accessibility in higher education, and so that we can measure how it's changing over time. We scan for up to WCAG 2.2 AAA, but for the purpose of this study, we're only talking about WCAG 2.1 AA failures—not only the more blatant and obvious fixes, but also the legal standard many US colleges and universities are held to for web accessibility.

The data from this report was pulled over the course of May 2026.



“When we first started using Silktide, our accessibility score was around 67%. Now, it's up to 94%, and we've climbed to 11th place in the Silktide Index.”

— Claire Fell, Liverpool John Moores University

Curious where your website actually stands?

That's okay. We're here to help all concerned parties: quickly and efficiently making your website more accessible (which, in this instance, also means way less sueable. Sueable isn't a word, but you get what we mean.)

We took the 17 most common WCAG 2.1 failures we see across higher ed and put them here. The real, fixable kind (Level A and AA). Think of it less as a scolding and more as the to-do list you'd have written yourself, if you weren't doing four jobs.

We've already scored your institution — and thousands of its peers — in the Silktide Index. It's public, it's free to look at, and it's the rare benchmark where you're quietly rooting for "average." Go find out before someone else points it out for you.



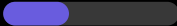
Silktide runs one of the world's largest public accessibility benchmarks — the Silktide Index — scoring thousands of organizations against WCAG.

The best institutions clear 98 out of 100. Plenty land in the teens.

[Find your school on the Silktide Index](#)



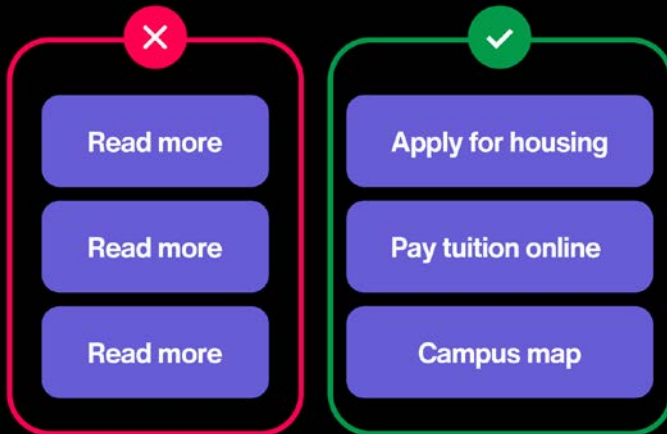
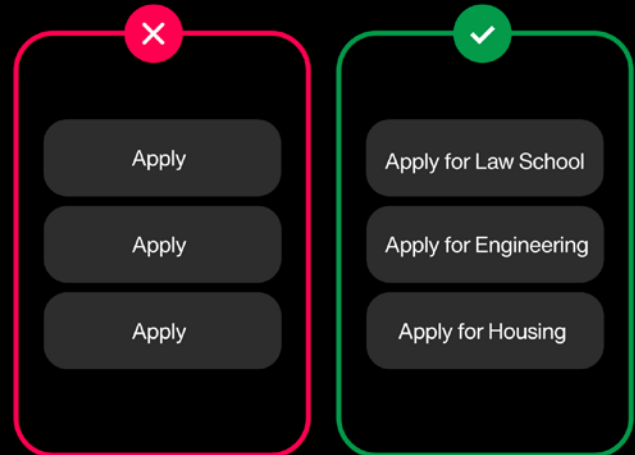
How often each failure shows up across higher education/

N°	Failure	WCAG	Level	How often we see it
01/	Identical link text → different destinations	Link Purpose	A	 96%
02/	Links don't explain their purpose	Link Purpose	A	 83%
03/	Link groups not semantic	Info & Relationships	A	 81%
04/	Insufficient text contrast	Contrast	AA	 76%
05/	Duplicate element IDs	Parsing	A	 73%
06/	PDFs have no heading structure	Info & Relationships	A	 72%
07/	Custom controls screen readers can't use	Name, Role, Value	A	 69%
08/	Form fields low contrast	Non-text Contrast	AA	 69%
09/	No visible focus indicator	Focus Visible	AA	 65%
10/	PDFs have no title	Page Titled	A	 64%
11/	PDFs not tagged	Info & Relationships	A	 59%
12/	PDFs don't specify a language	Language of Page	A	 54%
13/	Field purpose for autofill	Identify Input Purpose	AA	 49%
14/	Empty headings (no text)	Info & Relationships	A	 49%
15/	Page missing a top-level heading	Info & Relationships	A	 44%
16/	Data tables missing header cells	Info & Relationships	A	 38%
17/	Links signalled by color alone	Use of Color	A	 39%

01/ WCAG LINK PURPOSE (IN CONTEXT) [A] 96%

Identical link text points to different places

University sites are link-dense: programs have links, departments, deadlines, and forms have links, even links have links. The trouble starts when a dozen links all read “Apply” or “Learn more” but each points somewhere different. A screen-reader user who pulls up the page’s list of links sees the same phrase on repeat, with no way to tell them apart. At 96%, it’s the most common 2.1 failure we see across higher ed, and it’s a content habit, not a code bug.



02/ WCAG LINK PURPOSE (IN CONTEXT) [A] 83%

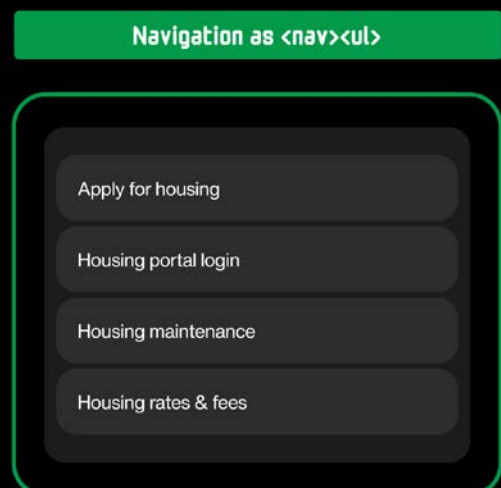
Links don't explain their purpose

Link text should stand on its own — “Apply for housing,” not “click here.” More than 8 in 10 sites still lean on “read more” and “learn more,” which tell screen-reader users nothing — especially when they pull up a list of every link on the page. A screen full of identical “read more”s is a dead end.

03/ WCAG INFO AND RELATIONSHIPS [A] 81%

Link groups and lists not written semantically

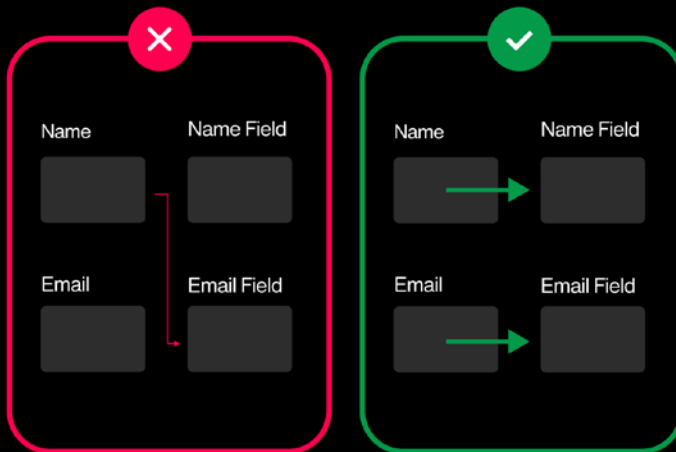
Navigation and footer links should be coded as a structured list, so a screen reader can announce the group and its size. On around 8 in 10 sites they’re a loose pile instead, stripping out that grouping right where people navigate most. Small nuance, outsized friction.



04/ WCAG CONTRAST (MINIMUM) [AA] 76%

Insufficient text contrast

Contrast is the brightness gap between text and its background; AA requires at least 4.5:1 for normal text. Around three-quarters of sites fall short with on-trend light-grey-on-white, or brand colors floated over a photo. Anyone with low vision, color blindness, or a phone in daylight is left squinting.



05/ WCAG PARSING [A] 73%

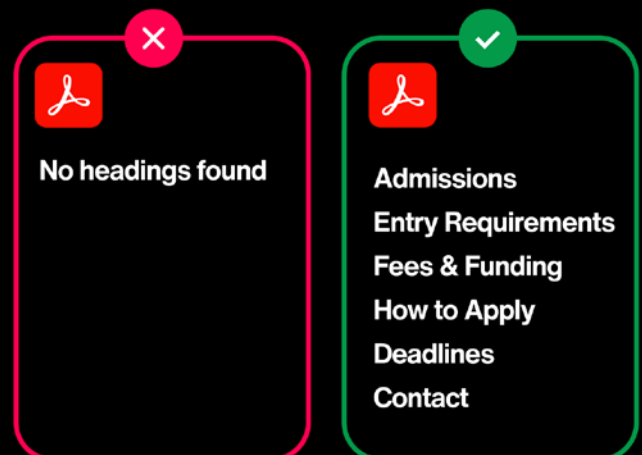
Duplicate element IDs

Every element ID on a page is meant to be unique. It's how labels, ARIA, and scripts find the right thing to point at. Reuse the same ID twice (easy to do when pages are stitched together from templates and widgets) and those connections quietly cross their wires. Nearly three-quarters of university sites do it somewhere.

06/ WCAG INFO AND RELATIONSHIPS [A] 72%

PDFs have no heading structure

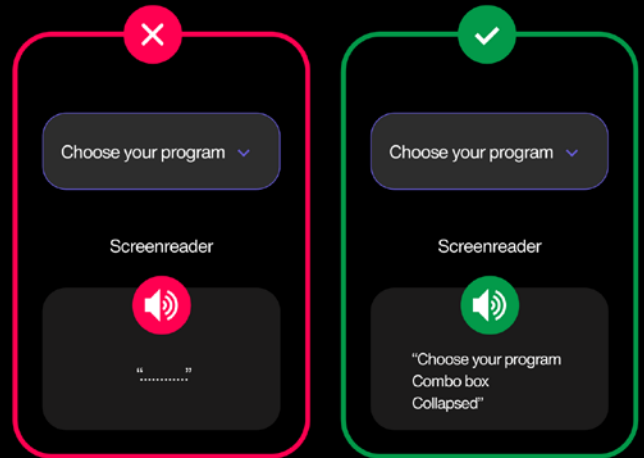
Inside a well-built PDF, headings act like a table of contents a screen reader can jump through. Strip them out (as most exported-from-Word documents do) and the reader is stuck scrolling top to bottom with no way to skip ahead. For a sector that publishes everything from syllabi to financial-aid guides as PDFs, it's a structural gap on 7 in 10 sites.



07/ WCAG NAME, ROLE, VALUE [A] 69%

Custom controls screen readers can't use

Custom dropdowns, tabs, and menus built without a proper name and role announce as nothing. A screen-reader user tabs onto a “Choose your program” control and hears silence—no label, no clue it’s even a dropdown. Roughly 7 in 10 university sites ship at least one. It’s the cost of a custom component that skipped the accessibility step.



You could check all this by hand. You won't, though.

Nobody can manually test thousands of pages and PDFs against dozens of WCAG criteria, then keep them fixed every time a department updates a page. That's not a knock on your team — it's arithmetic. Silktide's accessibility experts do exactly this for institutions like yours: all 17 of these, plus the hundreds that never make a top-17 list.

[Talk to a Silktide Expert](#)



“Before we were using Silktide, our approach to accessibility was very haphazard, very ad-hoc, and our understanding of what was really required of us to meet those standards and those best practices — we didn’t have a good understanding of that ourselves.”

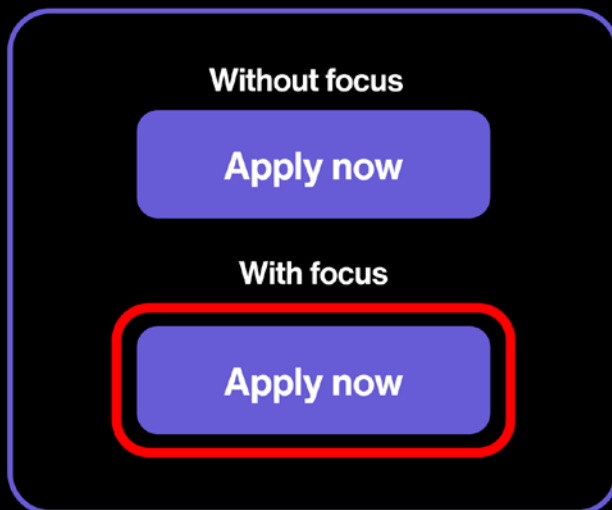
Christy Grant, Web Services Manager, The University of Texas at Dallas

08/ WCAG NON-TEXT CONTRAST [AA] 69%

Form controls don't contrast with their surroundings

Non-text contrast covers the visible edges of inputs, checkboxes, and buttons — they need to stand out from the background too. On around 7 in 10 sites they're so faint you can't see where a field begins, so low-vision users miss them and forms go unfinished. It's the text-contrast problem's quieter cousin.

The image shows two mobile app screens side-by-side. The left screen, outlined in red with a red 'X' icon, shows form controls (Name, Email, Phone, and Submit buttons) that are barely visible against the dark background. The right screen, outlined in green with a green checkmark icon, shows the same form controls with high contrast, making them clearly visible.



09/ WCAG FOCUS VISIBLE [AA] 65%

No visible focus indicator on controls

Tab through a page instead of using a mouse, and a focus indicator — an outline or highlight — should show which link or button you're on. On around 2 in 3 university sites, it's missing or invisible. Keyboard users (many with motor or vision disabilities) are left guessing where they are and what they're about to activate. It's the sector's most common real failure, and one of the simplest AA wins to ship.

10/ WCAG PAGE TITLED [A] 64%

PDFs have no title

Every PDF can carry a title in its properties — the human-readable name a screen reader announces when the file opens. On nearly 2 in 3 university sites it's blank, so a blind user hears "2024_v3_FINAL.pdf" instead of "Spring Financial Aid Application." For a sector that runs on PDFs, it's a glaring Level A miss.

The image shows two mobile app screens side-by-side, each displaying PDF metadata. The left screen, outlined in red with a red 'X' icon, shows a PDF titled '2024_v3_FINAL.pdf' with an empty author field. The right screen, outlined in green with a green checkmark icon, shows a PDF titled 'aid-spring.pdf' with the author 'Financial Aid Application'. Below each screen, a 'SCREEN READER READS' section shows the text that would be announced to a user. The left screen reads '"2024 underscore v3 underscore FINAL dot p d f"' while the right screen reads '"Spring Financial Aid Application"'. The right screen's title is more descriptive and user-friendly.

11/

WCAG
INFO AND RELATIONSHIPS
[A] 59%

PDFs not tagged

Tags are the invisible structure inside a PDF — headings, reading order, lists, tables — that assistive tech depends on. On nearly 3 in 5 sites PDFs ship untagged, so a screen reader reads them as one structureless mumble, or can't read them at all. Stacked on untitled PDFs, documents are the sector's single biggest content gap.

TAGGED



H1 Heading

H2 Heading

H3 Heading

Paragraph



Language not set

Université de
Montréal

Screenreader

"Yoo-niv-er-site de
Mon-tree-all"

Language set correctly

Université de
Montréal

Screenreader

"Oo-nee-ver-see-
tay deh Mon-ray-al"

12/

WCAG
LANGUAGE OF PAGE
[A] 54%

PDFs don't specify a language

One setting tells assistive tech what language a PDF is in, so a screen reader pronounces it correctly. Without it, an English document gets read with the wrong rules — and the international-admissions PDF you translated gets mangled entirely.

13/

WCAG
IDENTIFY INPUT PURPOSE
[AA] 49%

Field purpose not identified for autofill

This rule asks sites to label common fields — name, email, address — in code so browsers can autofill them. About half don't, switching off a genuine lifeline for people with cognitive or motor disabilities. On application and inquiry forms, that friction quietly costs you submissions too. Autofill makes using your website easier and more efficient for everyone.

Name

Email

Phone

Submit

Name

Email

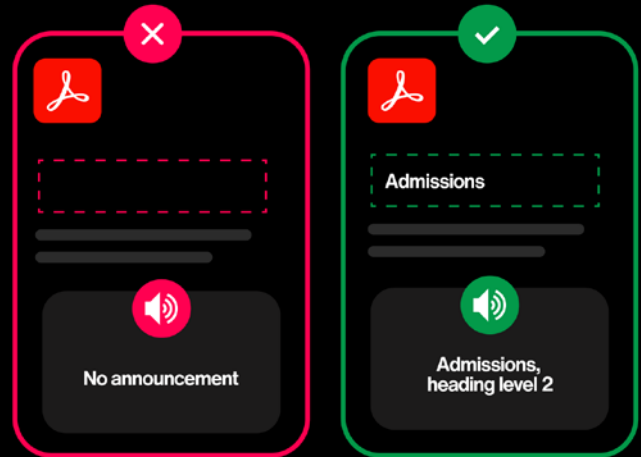
Phone

Submit

14/ WCAG INFO AND RELATIONSHIPS [A] 49%

Empty headings (a heading with no text)

This rule asks sites to label common fields — name, email, address — in code so browsers can autofill them. About half don't, switching off a genuine lifeline for people with cognitive or motor disabilities. On application and inquiry forms, that friction quietly costs you submissions too. Autofill makes using your website easier and more efficient for everyone.



MISSING



15/ WCAG INFO AND RELATIONSHIPS [A] 44%

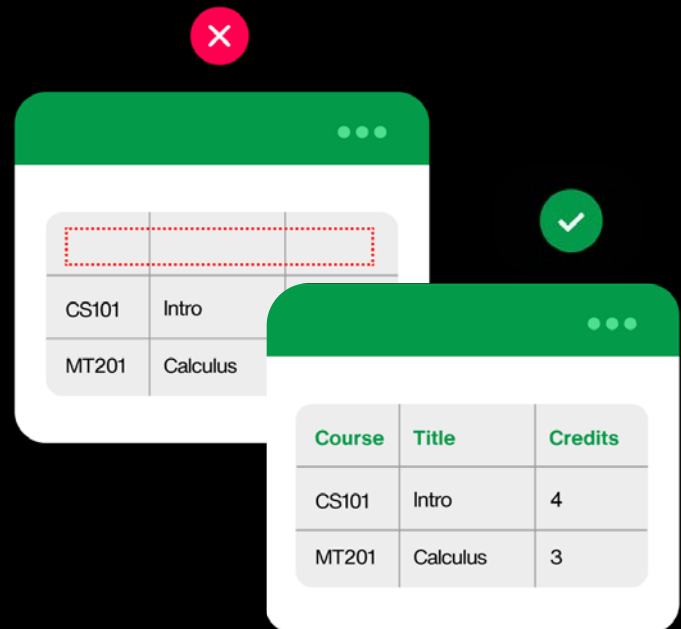
Page missing a top-level heading

Every page should open with a top-level heading (an H1) stating what it's about — the anchor screen-reader users navigate from. Around 4 in 10 pages have none, confiscating that map entirely. Bonus sting: it also dents your SEO and scannability for everyone else.

16/ WCAG INFO AND RELATIONSHIPS [A] 38%

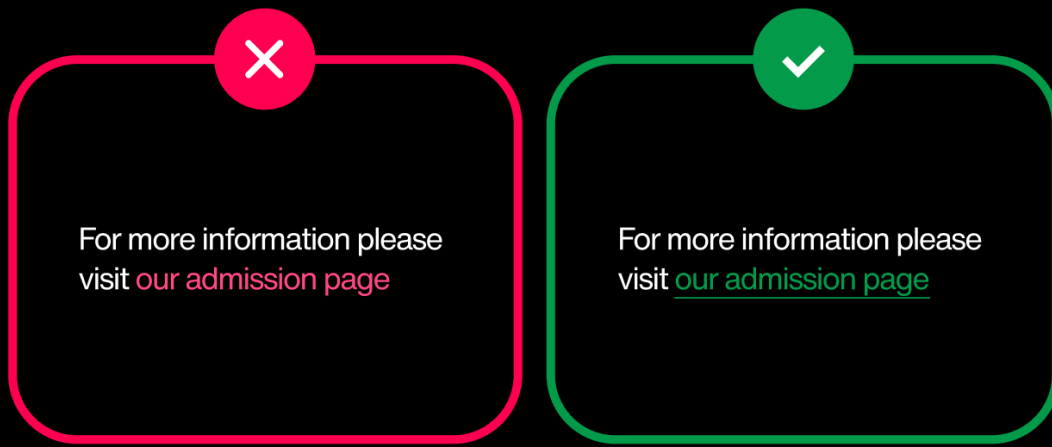
Data tables missing header cells

Higher ed runs on tables — course catalogs, tuition schedules, deadline grids, degree requirements. A proper table marks its header cells so a screen reader can say “row: Course, column: Credits” as the user moves through it. When the headers aren't marked, the table collapses into a flat stream of values with no idea which is which.



Links signalled by color alone

If the only thing that makes a link look like a link is its color, anyone who can't perceive that color (like color-blind users, or anyone on a sun-washed screen) can't tell it's clickable. Nearly 4 in 10 university sites rely on color alone. The fix is usually one line of CSS: bring back the underline.



“Being unable to catch and identify issues was one of our main issues with the other platform. It wasn’t until we started using Silktide we realized how much was missing.”

— **Joseph Vugteveen**, Web Project Coordinator,
Grand Valley State **University**

Solve all 17 — and the hundreds we didn't list.

Your web team can't audit thousands of pages and PDFs by hand, keep them fixed as the site changes, and stay ahead of a demand letter. At least not without cloning someone. Silktide is a complete web quality assurance platform that provides best-in-class automated testing, training, and manual auditing for accessibility.

We find every issue in this report, explain each one in plain English your whole team understands, and show your accessibility score ticking up as you close them out.

Students get in. Legal stays quiet. You get your evenings back.

Ready to see it in action?

[Talk to a Silktide Expert](#)

[Find your school on the Index](#)

About the data

Figures reflect Silktide's automated accessibility testing across the US higher-education sector in the Silktide Index. Each percentage is the share of higher-education sites in the Index where the issue appears. Criterion labels follow Silktide's own checks.

silktide/

silktide.com