

\$7.2M Grant Awarded to the Institute for Disability Research, Policy & Practice Brings Digital Accessibility to Students with Disabilities

06/24/2024



The goal is to ensure that individuals with disabilities can effectively use digital educational materials.

In October 2024, a new \$7.2 million center focused on providing accessible materials to students with disabilities will open at Utah State University. The new National Center on Accessible Digital Educational Materials and Instruction, or NCADEMI, will be housed at the USU Institute for Disability Research, Policy & Practice.

The center combines the expertise of two prominent, national programs at the IDRPP: WebAIM and the Center for Technical Assistance and Excellence in Special Education, or TAESE.

NCADEMI (pronounced N-cademy) will be directed by Cynthia Curry, and its principal investigator is Brenda Smith. IDRPP is part of the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services at USU.

“The new center provides both universal technical assistance and targeted technical assistance to state and local school systems,” said Matthew Wappett, executive director of the IDRPP.

Curry said the broad goal is making sure that individuals with disabilities, from preschool to transitioning from high

school, receive digital educational materials in a way that they can effectively use.

“It’s a really exciting merger of both [TAESE](#) and [WebAIM](#),” Curry said. “The way that TAESE will support NCADEMI is by leveraging a long history of providing technical assistance to state departments of education on implementing IDEA, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. . . And then WebAIM will apply deep expertise in web accessibility standards.”

In addition to its work on web accessibility, WebAIM has developed trainings for ensuring that digital materials, including Microsoft Word and PDF documents, are accessible.

NCADEMI will help solve a problem that changes and evolves with technology: inaccessible digital resources in schools. For example, an inaccessible website may be impossible for students with certain manual impairments to navigate, because a mouse is not usable for them. An image-based PDF cannot be read by a screen reader, which is essential technology used by students who are blind or have low vision. Mobile apps can add a whole new layer of inaccessibility to the mix.

Inaccessibility isn’t just a huge stumbling block to student learning; it’s also against the intent of U.S. law, which requires a free appropriate public education for students with disabilities. While laws have typically lagged behind the changes in technology, a new [Justice Department rule](#) states that state and local governments — and agencies that operate under them — must ensure their websites and mobile apps are accessible by 2026 or 2027, depending on the government entity’s size. NCADEMI will help schools and related agencies comply with that and other policies requiring accessibility of educational materials.

“This award recognizes USU’s long-term commitments to digital accessibility for individuals with disabilities,” Wappett said. “The IDRPP has been a leader in digital accessibility through our WebAIM program for 25 years, and this award demonstrates the national significance of this important work.”

In addition to providing services to state school agencies, NCADEMI will also advise: Part C lead agencies that serve children aged 0-2 with disabilities and developmental delays; parent information centers that serve families of children with disabilities; and pre-service educator (teacher training) programs.

The center will also have a website rich with searchable resources on a variety of topics. For example, procurement officers will learn how to make sure the materials purchased for schools are accessible, and individual teachers will find out how to create their own accessible materials like documents and videos. Guides and tools will also be provided.

The center's operations are slated to begin on October 1. While NCADEMI is new, it will continue and expand on the work of the [National Center on Educational Accessible Materials for Learning](#). NCADEMI is funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs. The grant provides \$1.8 million per year for four years.