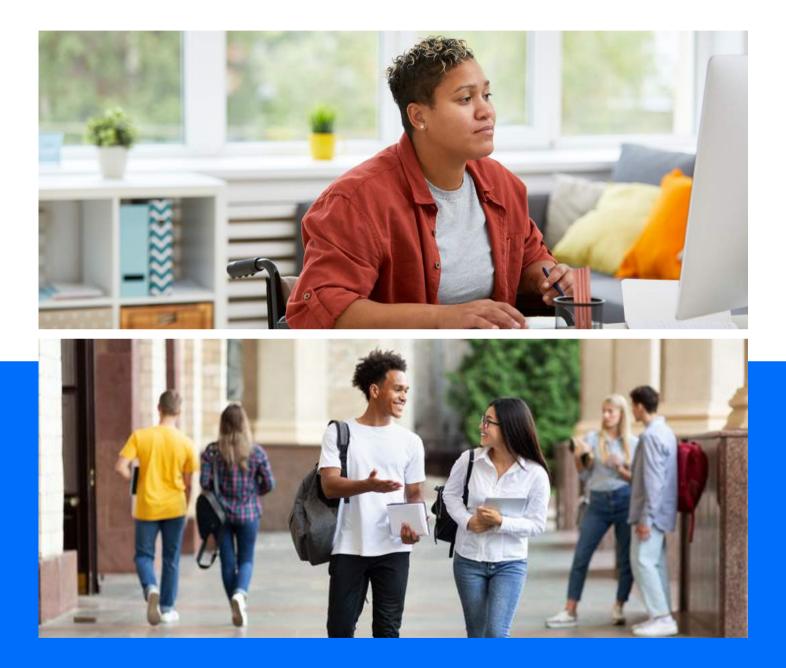# Higher Ed Admissions
Accessibility
Report

Kira Talent

Discover how a lack of accessibility in higher education admissions is **driving away applicants.**

Plus, **seven simple ways** to attract more of them.

This guide was crafted by Kira Talent to support schools as they transform the admissions process.

Kira works with more than 700 programs worldwide to build applicant-first assessments that help schools identify and select their best-fit students.

Higher Ed Admissions Accessibility Report

Not too long ago, accessibility in higher education consisted primarily of ramps installed in campus buildings and seats reserved at the front of lecture halls.

And while most schools have made significant advancements to reduce barriers for current students with accessibility needs, the admissions process remains a significant hurdle.

Unfortunately, accessibility support is still surrounded by stigma and an incorrect belief that accommodations give applicants an easier route into college. In the wake of the college admissions scandal, the media has sensationalized fraudulent disability claims as a method of scamming the admissions system. For students with accessibility needs, the existing sense that higher education sees disability and mental illness as a weakness is now compounded with the fear of being thought of as a fraud.

In the United States today, one in four adults have a disability and one in five live with a mental illness.

That's over 110 million potential applicants in the US alone.

There are so many bright people who might be holding back, thinking a school or program isn't right for them because of a lack of accessibility," explained Alexa Soares, a current MBA student living with depression. "The right communication can unlock a whole group of talented candidates."

Many of these applicants have already overcome and achieved so much in their lives. On top of technical and academic accomplishments, students with disabilities and mental illnesses have, often by necessity, developed an ability to innovate, adapt, and reframe situations. These kinds of soft skills are important for success in any post-secondary program.

Without the proper tools and strategies in place, schools may be inadvertently creating barriers for these applicants and, as a result, are missing out on a large pool of talented students.

"Having accessibility-related communications makes your school seen by an often untapped community," explained Soares.

"Many students with disabilities and mental health problems hold back from applying to colleges because they don't feel that they fit the description of what the school is looking for,"

Jimena Vergara, a current MBA student living with anxiety added. "By opening up the conversation around accessibility, and de-stigmatizing it, schools help people who have disabilities see themselves as students in those programs. That underlying confidence goes a long way in enabling us to put our best foot forward. And schools ultimately benefit from having access to a more diverse pool of talent."

37, 500, 000

American adults aged 18 and over report some trouble hearing.

Source: The National Institute for Deafness and Other Communication Disorders

32, 200, 000

American adults aged 18 and over experience vision loss.

Source: The American Foundation for the Blind

By making small changes to foster accessibility in your admissions process, and employing a proactive communication strategy focused on reaching applicants with disabilities and mental illnesses, you can attract a wider pool of diverse students to your campus.

"Every school will start from a different place," shared Varun Chandak, Founder and President of [Access to Success](#), a Canadian non-profit that supports the development of future leaders with disabilities and accessibility tech. "It may feel like there's too much to do, so it's easier not to do anything. But the consequences of a lack of accessibility are too great to not make a change."

"**Find what you can do and start from there.**"

To help guide this process, Kira Talent has conducted research and interviews with current students with accessibility needs as well as with professionals working in the higher education and accessibility space.

Based on these insights and first-hand experiences, we've outlined seven simple ways to improve the accessibility of your admissions process.

ACCESS TO SUCCESS

Access to Success is a Canadian non-profit that supports the development of future leaders with disabilities and accessibility tech. This is done through $75,000 in scholarships for MBA students with disabilities, and Canada's first accelerator for accessibility startups. The organization currently partners with business schools including Rotman, Ivey, and Smith School of Business.

7

simple ways to improve accessibility in your admissions process

Start the conversation

1

"Having resources for mental health was something that I was looking for in a school,"

shared Soares. "Some programs that I applied to were really lacking in terms of communication. I had to do a lot of self-directed research to find information."

"Rotman's open communication on the subject was why I felt comfortable speaking about my depression during the interview process, and one of the reasons why I ultimately chose to enroll."

It's estimated that only 24% of students with learning differences disclose their status to their schools, and only 9% of college students with mental health problems seek assistance from their schools.

This hesitation stems from the fact that there is very little communication surrounding disability and accessibility services in higher education – especially within the admissions process. While the COVID-19 pandemic has helped open new dialogues on diversity, equity and inclusion in higher education, mental health and disabilities still carry a heavy stigma.

7, 300, 000

students ages 3–21 receive special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

Source: The National Center for Education Statistics

4, 400, 000

children aged 3-17 years have diagnosed anxiety.

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

The lack of conversation surrounding accessibility makes it difficult for applicants with disabilities to see themselves as students in these programs, resulting in fewer of these students applying to post-secondary programs. For those who do apply, many feel that their disability or mental illness is something they need to hide from schools to keep them on par with non-disabled applicants.

"Schools need to be more proactive with their communication surrounding accessibility support," shared Chavira Razo.

"By advertising the accessibility resources available on campus, you can not only help these applicants see themselves at your school, but you can also make them believe that their disability is not something that will be held against them in the admissions process."

By including accessibility information in recruitment campaigns on social media, via email, or on high school campuses, you can engage a community of underserved applicants.

And these communications aren't only beneficial for students with accessibility needs. New generations of students expect more from their colleges and are favouring schools who take active steps towards creating a more inclusive environment.

"Even for people who don't have accessibility needs, it's good to know that the school offers these kinds of resources," added Soares. "It gives you a sense that, if you were to need help down the line, the school will support you."

APPLICANT SPOTLIGHT
Laura Chavira Razo

"After finishing med school and working as a physician, I decided to pursue a master's in health systems research. While working on the research side, I discovered that, whereas my current work was in the discovery and ideation side of innovation, I wanted to be on the execution side of innovation with a focus on business. So I decided to pursue an MBA."

Make the most of modern technology

2

Modern technology has helped to significantly lower barriers for students with disabilities and mental illnesses.

From automated closed captioning to screen reading applications, technological innovation has made it possible for students with accessibility needs to study independently. The barrier to doing so now lies squarely with a school making these technologies available.

"Schools need to leverage these technologies because they have a huge impact on students with disabilities being able to succeed," explained Rubab Fatima Rizvi, a CMA graduate with a visual impairment. "I use voice-over on my iPhone and an application called JAWS (Job Access With Speech) on my laptop, which is the most popular screen reader used by visually impaired people. Without that assistive technology, it would be very difficult for me to do anything independently. Having to submit anything in hardcopy would be impossible for someone with a visual impairment, without the help of a human assistant – and assistants aren't available 24/7."

JAWS

JAWS, Job Access With Speech, is the world's most popular screen reader developed for computer users whose vision loss prevents them from seeing screen content or navigating with a mouse. Users are able to navigate the Internet, write a document, read an email and create presentations independently. JAWS provides speech and Braille output for the most popular computer applications on a PC.

"Technology gives students with accessibility needs independence and autonomy."

For schools looking to bring more accessibility into their online presence, the best way to start is with their website. From adding alt text to images to providing accurate captioning for video content, there are many small changes that can make a big difference to an applicant's ability to access information on the page.

"An institution's online, student-facing content may very well be laden with violations of the World Wide Web Consortium's (W3C) Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) – a common standard which aims to provide access for all, regardless of user condition or choice of user interface," shared Inclusive Media and Design (IMD) Founder and Director, Rob Harvie. "A simple line of code may be keeping people who can't use a visual display, mouse, or trackpad from entering the resource's front door, as it were."

Harvie and his team at IMD work with dozens of schools in higher education to elevate their web and video accessibility. In 2020, the IMD team helped make improvements to the Kira Talent platform to meet WCAG 2.0 AA standards and ensure a fully accessible experience for all applicants.

INCLUSIVE MEDIA AND DESIGN

Inclusive Media and Design (IMD) is a Canadian company which provides testing and training in accessibility and helps organizations bring their web media up to current global best practices. Inclusive Media's experienced crew, which includes expert users of assistive technology, has helped dozens of schools in higher education elevate their web and video accessibility.

Another great way to test the accessibility of your website and resources is to ask your students for assistance. By conducting user testing and getting input from different screen reader users, schools can assess how accessible their websites are with these applicants.

"Applying to a university should be something that people can do independently," shared Rizvi.

"Having to seek assistance is a significant deterrent and will discourage students from applying to that university, as opposed to one that has a more accessible and user-friendly admissions process."
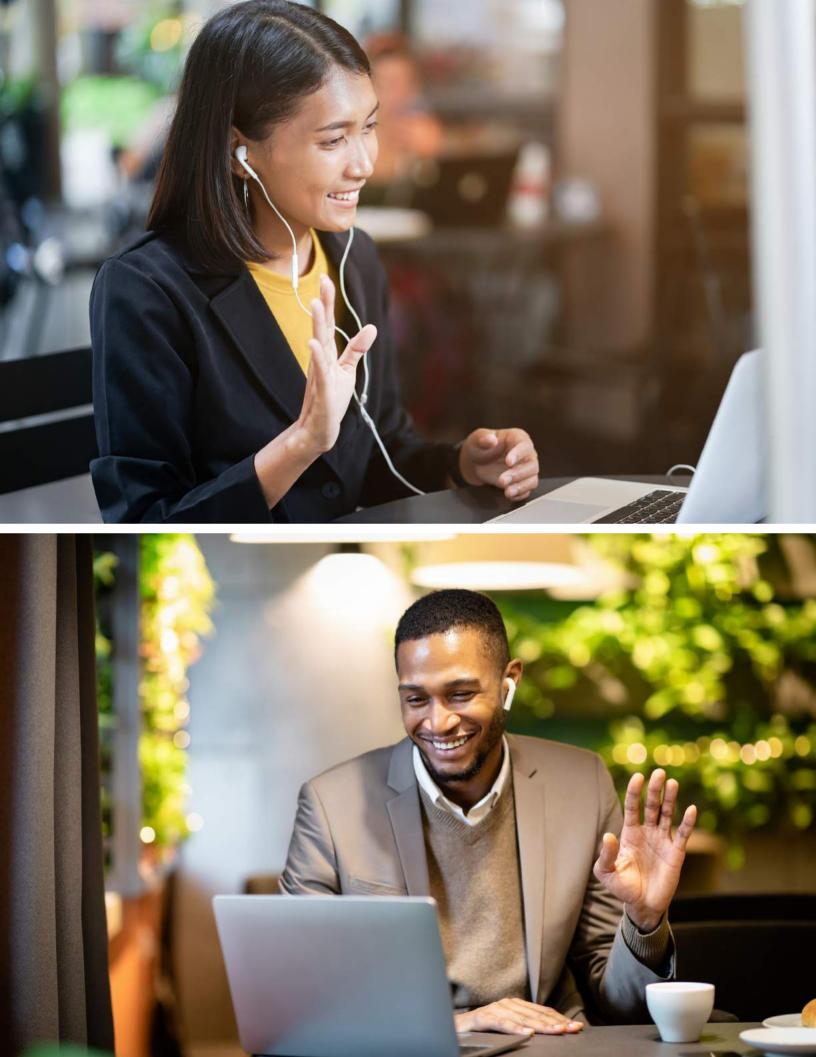
APPLICANT SPOTLIGHT
Rubab Fatima Rizvi

"I was born with congenital glaucoma, an eye condition that damages the optic nerve. Since birth, my left eye has been completely damaged and over time, vision in my right eye has been reduced to seeing only high contrast, light, and large objects.

I completed O-levels and A-levels in the commerce and accounting stream within the Cambridge GCE system, getting straight A's in both. After completing my Bachelor of Finance, finishing with a GPA of 3.97/4 I then completed a Certified Management Accountant (CMA) program and passed the exams on the first attempt. I was the first visually impaired CMA candidate and I had the highest score across Saudi Arabia.

Make closed captioning standard procedure

3

Automated closed captioning and transcription services are almost universally available across live and on-demand video platforms.

From Zoom calls to Facebook videos, closed captioning is quickly becoming one of the fastest and easiest ways to increase engagement in video content.

A recent study saw a 40% increase in views of captioned videos versus uncaptioned. The same study found viewers were 80% more likely to watch a video until the end when closed captions were available.

These numbers stem not only from the over 37.5 million American adults who are deaf or hard of hearing but also from the 67.3 million American adults who speak English as a second language.

Within the admissions process, making closed captioning for live and on-demand video content a standard procedure is a relatively simple addition that doesn't negatively impact nor unfairly advantage any one group of applicants.

85%

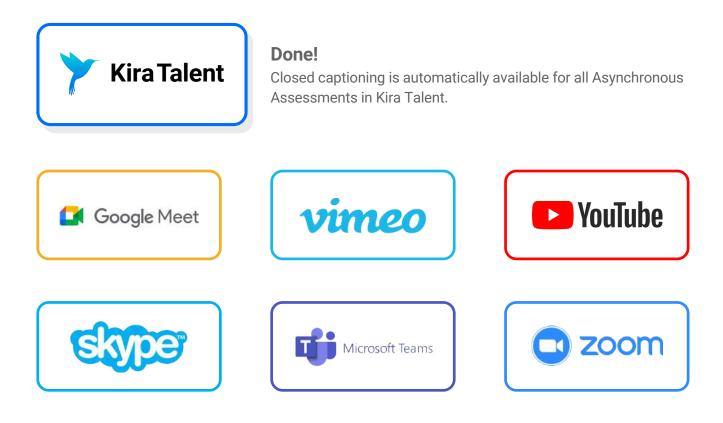of videos on Facebook are watched on mute with closed captioning.

Source: Digiday

12%

boost in view time for Facebook videos with closed captioning.

Source: Instapage

By making it easier to follow along with speech, closed captions help maintain concentration. This can provide a better experience for viewers with learning disabilities, attention deficits or autism, as well as viewers who speak English as a second language and viewers who may be experiencing nervousness or stress.

"The widespread transition from phone interviews to video interviews has helped me immensely," shared Chavira Razo. "Seeing people's faces not only makes it much easier to discern what they're saying through lip reading, gestures and expressions, but the live closed captioning is pretty accurate and incredibly helpful."

Click to turn on closed captioning for your video services:

Kira Talent

Done!
Closed captioning is automatically available for all Asynchronous Assessments in Kira Talent.

Google Meet

vimeo

YouTube

skype

Microsoft Teams

zoom

Break down the barriers and pave the path

4

"When I was seeking accommodations there was no centralized accessibility office, and the disjointed communication between departments caused a lot of back and forth and misunderstandings,"

shared Bianca De Rosa, a current MBA student. "I had to advocate for myself because it was often like a game of broken telephone, in that information was missed and no one was sure of the process."

Unfortunately, this experience is all too familiar for students with accessibility needs. Without a streamlined process, it's difficult for schools to address and share accommodation information unilaterally across departments, putting the onus on students to pick up the slack.

Many North American students are familiar with this disjointed system and have learned how to advocate for themselves. But for international students and students from less affluent backgrounds, advocating for accessibility services can be an unknown and harrowing prospect.

APPLICANT SPOTLIGHT

Bianca De Rosa

"One of my proudest accomplishments is starting a scholarship program in honour of my grandparents who immigrated from Italy. I was the first student at the university to create a scholarship. So far, I've raised over $53 000 for first and second-generation Canadian student leaders who are giving back to their communities."

Anna Clements is a PhD candidate at the Heller School for Social Policy and Management, studying race and how it affects [accessibility on college campuses.](#) She highlighted the difference between a school supporting its students with accommodations and a school making accommodations available to students. The latter, a prevalent system in most schools, means that students with disabilities are expected to advocate for themselves when it comes to getting admissions officers, faculty, and administration to honour their accommodations and disability needs.

"Most schools are addressing accessibility needs by adding a small tag line at the end of an email or webpage which says 'contact us'," shared Chavira Razo. "More often than not this email leads to an automatic reply with a note that says 'Submit this form to apply to accessibility services' and sometimes 'you can apply once you're accepted'. I see that as an unnecessary barrier."

In addition, these contact forms are often directed towards candidates with physical or learning disabilities, and few make any mention of accommodations for students with anxiety or other mental health concerns.

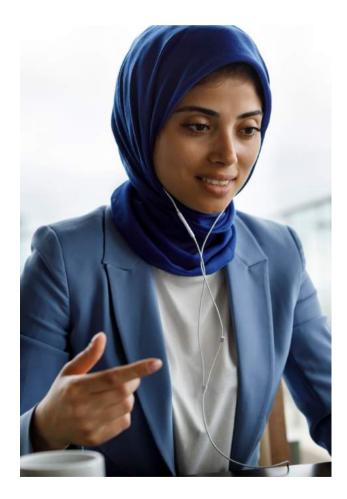**A simple change would be to incorporate an all-around accessibility request directly into the application form.**

SCHOOL SPOTLIGHT

University College Dublin (UCD)

"At the University College Dublin (UCD), I was offered a personal support worker who would help coordinate my needs and provide me with assistance for any work that I couldn't do independently with the use of assistive technology."

By including a section on accessibility and accommodation, the application form can share a message about the school's commitment to fostering an equitable and inclusive admissions process by assisting applicants with disabilities and other accessibility needs.

Applicants are able to select 'Yes, I have an accessibility request' and can immediately select from commonly available options such as "Closed captioning on video calls", "Extended response time", "Visual assistance", or "Other - please contact me."

Integrating this question directly into the application not only normalizes the requests and reduces the barrier for applicants, but it ensures that accessibility information is in a centralized place so applicants don't have to remind interviewers that they require accommodations.

An added bonus is that this form integration would enable admissions teams to reach out to applicants with accessibility needs directly and automatically. Within your application management software, you can set up processes to automatically send specific resources to applicants who clicked on these options.

"Directing useful communications to people who have identified that they would need or be interested in accessibility resources would be incredibly beneficial," explained Soares. "I often got emails about things that weren't applicable to me or could only be actioned once term started. That not only drowned out the useful bits of information, but it also created anxiety for me because I had it on my mind but couldn't take action for a long time."

Approach with an international perspective

5

The United States has the world's largest population of international students with nearly 5% of all post-secondary students coming from outside the country.

These students typically pay up to three times as much tuition as domestic students, making up 28% of admissions revenue for America's public universities, totalling well over $9 billion.

With those numbers, it's hardly surprising that international recruitment is a priority for admissions teams.

"Top universities want to see diversity on their campus. That needs to start in the admissions process," shared Rizvi. "Students coming from overseas are often unable to visit the campus or phone an admissions officer to get more information. Schools need to ensure that these applicants are able to learn about the school and their support services online."

"Having an accessible online presence is the best way to attract international applicants."

28%

of admissions revenue for America's public universities is brought in by international students.

Source: Business Insider

$9 Billion

in tuition revenue was paid by international students at America's public universities.

Source: Business Insider

And when it comes to engaging international students, sometimes the simplest fix can be the most powerful.

"I didn't know what 'accommodations' meant," explained Chavira Razo.

"In my home country we use the term 'disability', so even when I saw the note saying 'contact us if you need accommodations' I didn't know that it applied to me."

This experience was shared by multiple interviewees, several of whom noted that they would have requested accommodations had they known there were options available to them.

"A good way to address this is by having an accessibility resources page that includes both the legal definition of disability, as well as a common language explanation of what the different types of disabilities are and what accessibility support is available for students with this disability," shared Chandak.

By using more universally recognizable terms such as "accessibility" or "disability" in communications, schools can ensure that international applicants are able to get the support they need.

"My cohort had students from over 40 countries," shared Chavira Razo. "It's important for admissions teams to ensure that their communications are clear for non-native English speakers."

APPLICANT SPOTLIGHT

Jimena Vergara

"I am a physicist and an engineer and have worked in the oil and gas industry in Columbia for seven years. During that time I realized that there was a disconnect between the business objectives and strategies and the management of the surrounding community. That's why I decided to pursue an MBA."
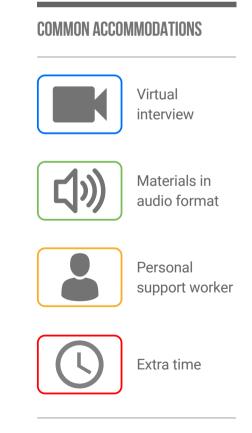
Give examples of the help that's available

6

For many applicants with accessibility needs, the biggest hurdle in regards to accessing support is taking that first step to reach out and advocate for themselves and their needs.

Most accessibility support systems rely on students submitting a specific request for accommodations and the school accepting or denying that submission. However, many students aren't aware of the accommodations and support available to them and therefore aren't clear on what they can ask for.

This knowledge gap accounts for a dropout rate that is nearly three times as high for students with learning differences compared to neurologically typical students. By removing that barrier to access and engaging students with accessibility services, studies have shown that both their grades and graduation rates improve significantly.

One of the best ways to reduce that barrier is to offer examples of available accommodations.

COMMON ACCOMMODATIONS

Virtual interview

Materials in audio format

Personal support worker

Extra time

"Applicants don't always know what they can ask for or what could be useful given the specific circumstances of the application process," explained Chavira Razo. "Schools can help by providing examples such as 'prep materials in audio format', 'additional response time', or other accessibility accommodations that can be provided without much effort."

By offering examples of available accommodations, schools can help reduce the stigma around accessibility requests and reinforce the idea that the use of accommodations will not negatively impact an individual's application.

"[The Government of Canada's Business Benefits Finder](#) is a well-designed example," shared Chandak. "It asks you a series of questions and, based on your answers, gives you recommendations for funding options that are applicable to your specific business. Using this format as a model for accessibility support, schools could ask applicants a series of questions, then provide information specific to their situation without putting any extra work on the school's accessibility support personnel."

"People often don't feel comfortable or confident enough to ask for specific accommodations," continued Chavira Razo. "Having examples allows them to say 'yes, that would help me,' instead of the only options being to struggle through the admissions process alone, or reach out to the school without knowing exactly what to ask for."

Use more data points in admissions decisions

7

Many admissions teams rely on less than three data points when making admissions decisions.

There are the cognitive variables, GPA and applicable standardized test scores, and the interview.

This traditional breakdown of admissions assessments creates tremendous pressure on all students to showcase the sum of their efforts and talents in relatively constricted formats. For applicants with disabilities and mental illnesses, these one-off chances can create significant barriers to entry.

Inaccessibility in action:

BUSY ROOMS MAKE FOR TRICKY CONVERSATIONS

Laura Chavira Razo, MBA candidate

"The year I was applying to MBA programs my hearing levels started to decline. When I was going through the admissions process there were several interviews and recruitment events. When you use hearing aids all noises are amplified, so it can be difficult to differentiate a human voice from background noise. I was really nervous about it seeming like I didn't understand what people were talking about where in reality I may have just not been able to hear them. Especially being a foreign student, I was worried that I would give off the impression that my English wasn't good enough."

BALANCING OUT TEST STRESS

Jimena Vergara, MBA candidate

"The GMAT was a very difficult experience for me. The atmosphere around the test is strenuous for most students, but especially for those who have anxiety. Having a process where standardized test scores don't make or break your application helps to not only reduce anxiety but to mitigate potentially low marks from students who were disproportionately affected by the stressful environment."

[Detroit Mercy Dental](#), for example, uses Kira's Asynchronous Assessments in conjunction with in-person interviews. By employing both formats, the program gives applicants multiple ways to showcase their talents and reviewers multiple data points through which to assess candidates.

"Every applicant who meets our minimum cognitive thresholds is invited to a Kira assessment and an in-person interview. Both are required and are weighed equally in the final decision-making process," shared Dr. Steven Chang, the Director of Admissions at Detroit Mercy Dental. "Often if a student does well in the interview they do well in the Kira assessment. But sometimes students who didn't do well in one will shine in the other."

Through this dual-interviewing method, the program gets to leverage the benefits of both methods while seeing how applicants perform in different settings. For students with accessibility needs, this strategy helps to level the playing field.

By having multiple data points you can minimize the negative impact of unknown or unidentified accessibility factors while also gaining a more comprehensive view of all your applicants.

R

SCHOOL SPOTLIGHT

Rotman School of Management

"Rotman's communication on the subject was why I felt comfortable speaking about my depression during the interview process. Having a school that had resources for mental health was something that I was looking for."
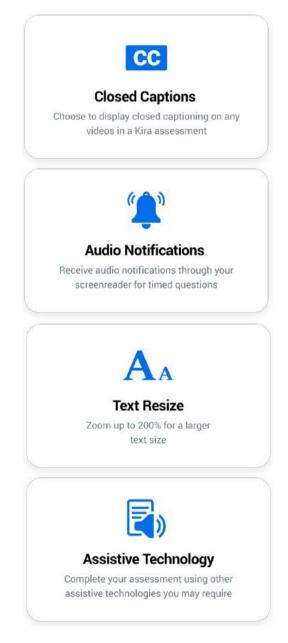
Improving accessibility in admissions

Kira Talent is certified accessible by WCAG 2.0 AA standards.

We believe every student deserves a level playing field on the road to college. We designed our platform to help schools create a fairer, more accessible applicant experience.

Kira's in-platform experience empowers all applicants, including those with disabilities, to complete a Kira assessment without requiring any additional accommodations.

Ready to engage more applicants?

Get Started

CC

Closed Captions

Choose to display closed captioning on any videos in a Kira assessment

Audio Notifications

Receive audio notifications through your screenreader for timed questions

A A

Text Resize

Zoom up to 200% for a larger text size

Assistive Technology

Complete your assessment using other assistive technologies you may require

Kira Talent