A light-bulb moment at a conference in 1996 led to the creation of WebAIM (Web Accessibility in Mind), a project at Utah State University’s Center for Persons with Disabilities that now offers guidance in accessible web design and development to users around the world.

Cyndi Rowland, the CPD’s associate director and executive director of WebAIM, said that in 1996, the CPD was one of the first five UCEDDs (University Centers of Excellence in Developmental Disabilities) to have a web presence. As the chair of the web committee, she was presenting a poster at the annual AUCD (Association of University Centers on Disability) conference when a blind man approached her and began asking questions about her poster, the CPD’s web site, and if the site was accessible to him.

“I thought to myself, I’m not sure I understand his question,” Rowland said. “I had spent my entire career in disability and technology and I wasn’t sure what he was asking. I did some research, and found out not only was the issue that he couldn’t get to our site, but if someone used a screen reader or couldn’t use a mouse, they couldn’t access the information.

“Everyone has a light-bulb moment at some point in their life. This was it for me. Here I was, more geeky than most in the disability field, and thought wow, if I didn’t get it how can the field expect anyone else to? This is a huge problem, and it’s going to need everyone to be part of the solution.”

She began looking for funding, and came upon a long shot—a Department of Education Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) grant competition. At that time, she said, the federal government was focusing on distance education and the idea that people could connect any time, from anywhere.

“The feds wanted to fund this idea of postsecondary students learning anywhere, anytime, but were they bold enough to extend it for anyone,” including people with disabilities, Rowland said. She made cold calls to entities like PBS and the course management system now known as Blackboard along with enlisting other institutions and educational compacts across the nation.

“I put together a partnership and a national profile and we got funded for four years,” Rowland said. “We started out by saying we could create materials for web developers in postsecondary education so they would know what they needed to do so that all students could participate in online education. It was a narrow focus, and it has broadened considerably.”

WebAIM was funded in 1998 and began operations in 1999, Rowland said. Starting this October, it celebrates its 15th anniversary.

“It’s kind of unique for a project funded on soft money to be around that many years after the initial grant funding,” Rowland said. “People view our resources as valuable.”

Those resources include consulting, training, and information dissemination.

“We’ve certainly seen a lot of changes over the years,” said WebAIM associate director Jared Smith. “When we first started, we were grant funded and focused on certain areas. As demand increased over time, we found ourselves less reliant on grants, and now the core project functions entirely grant-free.”

Demand for consulting services and training continues to increase, he said, and there is no shortage of work to be done.

“We turn away at least as much work as we’re taking on because of our capacity, and our interest in things that we want to make sure are a good match for us,” Smith said. “We can choose to work with people who really want a better product for their customers.”
Smith said over the years, the WebAIM staff have seen improvements in awareness by designers, and improvements in web site accessibility.

“The reality is, the web innovates, people push boundaries, and accessibility tends to lag,” Smith said. “That’s not going to change. There are core foundational things with web accessibility that haven’t changed in 15 years, but they are problems we still see. There are hundreds of developers, every day, building their first web sites. If they’re not aware, they will have basic accessibility issues.”

Currently, WebAIM holds four trainings each year on the USU campus. Enrollment is capped at 22, and it fills every time, Rowland said.

Training for industry professionals often begins as a job on-campus for USU students. Many senior staff members started as student workers, Rowland said, and students are an important part of WebAIM.

“If they’re exceptional, we nurture them along,” she said. “A lot of students who work for us end up in industry. We’ve been able to supply industry leaders with people who are intimately familiar with disability. To deeply learn topical content is to leave here forever changed.”

The consulting and training components of the program are fee-for-service. Much of the information on web accessibility, though, is available online for free on the WebAIM web site.

“We never wanted someone to say they can’t do it because the tools and the training are so expensive,” Rowland said. “There is a lot of information that is ready for them to use—it just takes their own time and energy.”

By 2001, Rowland said, WebAIM already had a stellar reputation as a leader in web accessibility. And then something unexpected happened. A group at Temple University was developing the WAVE tool, which could be used by developers to analyze the accessibility of their own web sites as they were building them. The Temple researcher who created the tool died, and the project was given to WebAIM to carry on in his memory.

“We were gifted, out of the blue from Temple University, this amazing concept of a tool,” Rowland said. “In the 12-13 years we’ve had WAVE here, we’ve grown it, added functionality, and stayed true to one of our core values—to make resources available to everyone.”

The online WAVE tool is used nearly a million times each year to evaluate web site accessibility. Developers can enter a URL on the WAVE web site, or use the standalone tool.

While the WAVE tool is a key component of WebAIM’s value to the accessibility community, the project’s web site and e-mail discussion lists contain a wealth of information for web designers and developers.

More than 2,300 messages were posted to the list in the last year, Smith said, resulting in 3.5 million e-mails being distributed. In its 15-year history, WebAIM’s lists have sent out about 20 million messages.

“We reinvest a lot of time and effort back into improving the body of knowledge in the field,” Smith said.

“Because the web is world wide, our influence is not limited to the U.S.,” Rowland said. “We participate and engage internationally. Many of our resources have been translated into an array of languages. That shows the hunger that’s out there for our resources.”
“We’re trying to put ourselves out of business,” Smith said of WebAIM’s goal to make the web accessible to everyone. "But for now, there is no shortage of work to be done."