



SPEC Kit 321

Services for Users with Disabilities

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SURVEY RESULTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

When ARL last gathered information from member libraries about services for users with disabilities more than 10 years ago, several trends emerged. There were a growing number of library users with a broad range of disabilities. While physical access to libraries was improving, more work remained, particularly in older buildings. Assistive technology was prevalent, but equipment maintenance could be an issue. And staff training and attitudes were the weak link in the service chain.

This survey sought to better understand library services for users with disabilities today and how accessibility has changed for them in the complex environments of ARL libraries. It explored what services are being provided and how users are made aware of them; what assistive technologies are being offered today and who maintains them; which library staff have responsibility for providing services and how are they trained; and what service policies and procedures are in place for users with disabilities. The survey was conducted between August 23 and October 15, 2010. Sixty-two of the 125 ARL member libraries completed the survey for a response rate of 50%.

Library Staff Assistance

All of the responding libraries provide assistance with retrieving books and other materials from the library stacks. All but a few help users with disabilities to search the catalog and other online resources, and to copy, scan, or print library materials. Some provide delivery service to buildings on campus, assistance with adaptive equipment, and directional assistance for users with visual impairment. Library staff will also order alternative format textbooks or special equipment,

if needed. A significant number of respondents also offer proxy borrowing cards and extended loan periods.

While it is common that students first register with their university's office of disabilities services to obtain a referral for library assistance, almost all of the responding libraries report that users may approach any service desk to request assistance or may request an appointment by phone or e-mail. About half of the respondents also have an online request form; about a quarter have a special service desk.

Workspace Accommodations

Workspace accommodations are quite varied among the respondents. A majority of the responding libraries (52 or 84%) provide height adjustable workstations, a relatively inexpensive solution and a minimal accommodation for people who are in wheelchairs or who simply need adjustable furniture. One library mentioned that all of their study carrels and tables are wheelchair accessible. Thirty-seven respondents (60%) provide some kind of assistive technology on their general-purpose public computers (several mentioned the Microsoft accessibility package and/or Zoom Text) and well over half provide workstations in a quiet or separate workspace of some kind.

Other workspace accommodations include circulation of special equipment and laptops outfitted with specialized software, accommodation for seeing-eye dogs, light dimmers and window blinds, improved lighting for less reflection and better color rendering, sound-proofed or non-quiet rooms for dictation, and voice recognition tools.

As might be expected, given the range of size of the responding libraries and differing models of collaboration with campus disability offices, the number

of multiple purpose public workstations with some assistive technology is extremely variable. One library system reported 500 workstations, all with some kind of accessibility software, including Zoom Text, JAWS, and Kurzweil 3000. The largest number of public workstations with assistive technology is 558; the smallest units have one. The average is 114 workstations, but the median figure is eight. Clearly, the more common approach is to provide assistive technology on just a few of the general-purpose workstations. The number of dedicated assistive technology workstations is low, commonly only two or three. The average number of quiet rooms is also just two or three, but one respondent reported 20 rooms available.

Disabled patrons have a variety of options for obtaining access to specialized workspaces. Seventy-five percent of the respondents indicated that patrons may approach any service desk. Almost half reported that workspaces are self-service with signage pointing the way. Thirteen libraries have a special service desk. Seven issue a key, code, or card swipe access to special, locked workspaces, and most of the corresponding Web pages had quite specific directions for obtaining and using these keys. The intent of these libraries seems clear: to provide security for equipment but also to provide access without intervention for disabled persons so they can come and go as they please. Only five have online reservations for special rooms or equipment.

Specialized Software

The responses to the Specialized Software section of the study reflect a still fairly limited pool of choices of high-quality software packages. Existing options for software can be cost prohibitive, and the technology may not be as sophisticated as we might expect or desire (e.g., screen readers still cannot interpret graphics.)

Sixty libraries reported use of text magnification software. Of those, 78% use the Zoom Text magnifier and reader, noted above as being ubiquitous in some of the larger public computer labs. Adobe Acrobat and the Microsoft Magnifier come in at 55% and 40%, respectively. MAGic seems to have lost ground, used for magnification by only twelve of the respondents. Of the 52 responding libraries reporting use of screen reader software, 47 (90%) have JAWS, 13 (25%) use

MAGic as a reader, and 13 have Narrator (part of the Microsoft Accessibility package.)

The increase of awareness of learning disabilities was noted in SPEC Kit 243 in 1999 and is reflected in much of the current literature. As knowledge of such disabilities has increased, the more sophisticated scanner/reading/writing systems have gained in popularity and usage. These systems are also very useful for learners of English as a second language. Twenty-nine of the 62 responding libraries report using some version of Kurzweil, clearly the front runner in this type of system. Survey respondents also reported use of regular scanners plus OCR software such as OpenBook (Freedom Scientific) and ABBYY FineReader. Dragon Naturally Speaking dominates the field of speech recognition or dictation software. Eighteen respondents have word completion software with Inspiration as the front runner.

Only 16 respondents reported use of the Microsoft Windows accessibility package (now under "Ease of Access" in the Accessories menu of Windows 7). Since individual components of the Microsoft accessibility package drew higher numbers in responses to other sections of this survey, this low number could reflect usage of only parts of the package and/or confusion over the name of this suite. It is likely that most libraries have not explored all the components of this toolkit, which may be readily available on their public computers. Only three libraries reported using the Premier Accessibility package, probably due to the readily available Windows package. It should be noted that software for converting text to Braille was not included in the survey but is mentioned in the open comments by at least three libraries. Several libraries in this and other sections of the survey also mentioned the services for Braille readers available through the Library of Congress.

Specialized Hardware

The responding libraries provide a large array of assistive hardware for disabled users. At the 53 responding libraries, scanners (79%) and speakers (66%) are the most common types of equipment, followed by microphones, noise reduction headphones, and motor trackballs. A third of the respondents provide some kind of augmented keyboard and some provide joysticks.

Only one library has vocal labels for the keyboard, and one other has light signals for computer sounds.

Desktop video magnifiers and CCTV units for the visually impaired are available at a majority of the responding libraries. Three libraries have at least small pocket or portable magnifiers. In the open comments, fifteen respondents reported the availability of some kind of Braille equipment: raised, tactile keyboards, Braille printers, Braille embossers, and Braille (typewriters). Two libraries mentioned videophones for sign language. Others noted talking calculators, desktop illuminated magnifiers, and talking book players, including the discontinued Kurzweil Reading Edge machine. Digital voice recorders are provided at fourteen locations.

Selecting and Publicizing Services

When asked how the library decides which services and technology to provide for users with disabilities, the majority reported that they respond to patrons' requests. At a little more than half of the libraries, a service coordinator makes recommendations. At many institutions, a central disabilities office mandates which services and technology to provide, and a significant number of the responding libraries consult or coordinate with that office. About a quarter of the respondents have received donations for specific items. Only nine libraries report that they have surveyed their users about their needs.

The three most common methods libraries use to inform potential users about services are through the campus disabilities office, the library website, and word of mouth. Services are also promoted through library signage, in instruction and orientation sessions, and through brochures and flyers. A few respondents have placed articles in either a library newsletter or campus newspaper.

Coordinating Services

At 18 of the responding institutions, an individual in a central unit has primary responsibility for coordinating support services for persons with disabilities. At another 18 institutions, this responsibility is shared between the central disabilities coordinator and a library disabilities coordinator. Thirteen respondents report that a library disabilities coordinator has primary

responsibility for this role. Ten other libraries report that another individual or a committee assumes the service coordination responsibility.

The frequency with which the central coordinator and library staff interact ranges from infrequently, to as needed, to often. Most of the respondents indicated there is regular, on-going contact as often as they feel is necessary.

The survey asked the libraries that employ an ADA officer/disabilities coordinator or other designated person to oversee services for users with disabilities to provide the approximate percentage of time spent coordinating services. Of the 29 positions described, only three spend 90% to 100% of their time on coordinating services. Four devote 30% to 50% of their time to these activities. For the rest, service coordination accounts for between 1% and 10% of their work responsibilities.

The survey next asked who has responsibility for interpreting applicable disabilities laws for library staff. At all but a few institutions, the central disabilities coordinator has primary responsibility. At many institutions, this individual shares the responsibility with the organization's counsel or legal unit and the library's disabilities coordinator. At the other institutions the responsibility falls primarily on legal counsel.

Library Service Providers

Responses to a question about which library staff members are expected to provide services for users with disabilities overwhelmingly echoed the statement that, "All staff who work on a public services desk are responsible for assisting users with disabilities." Or as one respondent commented, "At the minimum, anyone approached should be able to make a proper referral."

The primary way that library staff members receive training about assisting users with disabilities and how to use the available assistive technology is by hands-on training from the disabilities coordinator. A number of respondents report that staff also occasionally attend workshops, webinars, and conferences, or consult manuals. Twelve libraries reported making use of vendors or outside consultants for technology training as well as tips on helping the users and

sensitivity awareness. A significant number report that staff members are entirely self-trained. Online tutorials and video training are not common, used by 10% or fewer of the respondents.

Assistive Technology and Funding Support

The survey asked respondents to indicate financial support for three types of assistive technology: software, computer hardware, and other equipment. The funding source for 60% of the libraries is their regular library operating budget. Just under half of the respondents indicated some financial assistance from the central disabilities office. The library IT budget provides funding at 38% of the responding libraries and the central IT budget provides funds at 19%. Only three libraries have a portion of their budget identified specifically as an ADA/disabilities allocation. Other sources were grants and donations. One respondent mentioned the university's computer access fee as a possible source that could be applied for, but was very competitive.

By far, the major source of technical support for maintaining library workstation hardware, software, and other equipment is the library's IT staff. The central disabilities office and/or the central IT staff supplement this support at 17 libraries (29%), depending on the type of service. At about a quarter of the surveyed libraries, the library coordinator has some responsibility for troubleshooting software, but has little to do with installations or hardware and equipment repair. A significant number of respondents indicated that library facilities staff service equipment and also mentioned warranties that are serviced by the vendor.

Library Website Accessibility

Having an accessible library website is clearly a concern for the majority of libraries; over 60% of those surveyed have staff trained in Web accessibility for users with disabilities. Fewer libraries (about half) have staff trained in testing Web products such as databases, in-house branded pages, and Web tutorials. Most libraries have at least one Web developer on whom they depend for special skills in these areas. One library mentioned their systems staff as resources. Several libraries noted that the Web developer is

mainly self-taught or has a special interest in accessibility issues. Support from the central disabilities office is a fairly common way for the library Web person to develop skills in this area.

Few libraries are looking at vendor databases yet; some respondents said they rely on their reference staff to notice problems with databases, the catalog, and other resources. Regular and frequent auditing of Web pages appears to be uncommon, but there seems to be a heightened awareness of Web accessibility standards and the need to apply them. The question dealing with the criteria used for Web accessibility testing yielded very specific responses that demonstrated a considerable depth of understanding and awareness; libraries may be doing more evaluation than they realize. Compliance with Section 508 of the Americans with Disabilities Act and/or W3C (World Wide Web Consortium) standards is the method most often mentioned in the survey responses. WAVE is a frequently mentioned accessibility evaluation tool.

Conclusion

Most sources, including the US Census Bureau, cite figures of almost 20% of the population being affected by a disability of some kind. The majority of these people are not institutionalized. As the baby boomer generation grows, this figure will likely increase, hopefully in concert with greater understanding and awareness of what it means to have a disability that requires adaptive technology. Libraries are particularly willing partners in providing accessibility, but challenged further by shrinking budgets to meet the needs of this growing population. One way to offset the lack of resources is to collaborate. The survey results indicate an increasingly close relationship between campus or central disabilities offices and the academic libraries. In several cases, the campus disabilities office runs the library assistive technology center or workstations and usually provides funding and staff support at some level. Often, the library's services are guided by the campus office; libraries tend to work through them rather than surveying the students themselves.

Information technology is changing at lightning speed and the assistive technologies will likely improve accordingly. However, the names of some of

the major players in the field of assistive software and hardware have not changed since 1999, although they may have swapped parent companies. Prices of the older tools remain high and newer, more sophisticated programs are sometimes impossibly expensive, especially for smaller library systems. Hopefully, the growing market for adaptive technology will drive a more competitive market and result in more reasonable pricing.

Static library budgets have also resulted in significant staffing cuts throughout the past decade. Some of the most striking parts of this survey are the responses in the staff training and library providers sections. Although all or nearly all staff in most of the surveyed libraries are expected to have some level of ability to help users with disabilities, a surprising number of staff members are entirely self-taught or getting their training as best they can, in occasional workshops, at conferences, or from vendors. The majority

of library ADA coordinators allocate only 1% – 10% of their time to performing ADA-related duties. They are bibliographic instruction coordinators, subject specialists, building managers, reference librarians, and digital services librarians with many additional responsibilities. Only two of the surveyed libraries had full-time coordinators for ADA services. This fragmented approach to coordinating the programs was in evidence at the time of the older ARL surveys and has not changed. However, this did not stop the vast majority of responding libraries from providing an impressive array of services which is well demonstrated by a perusal of some of the representative Web pages in this publication. Yet the respondents' comments yielded repeated concerns that they were not doing enough. Clearly, the dedication to providing assistive services is there and the challenge remains to find ways to maintain them at a high level.