

Developing Inclusive Research Libraries for Patrons and Staff of All Abilities

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One in five Americans lives with a disability; more than half of them live with a disability that significantly impacts how they accomplish day-to-day tasks.¹ Almost one in seven Canadians reports having a disability; about half of them consider their disabilities to be “severe” or “very severe.”² Unsurprisingly, those numbers increase with age so, as the population lives longer, there will be more and more people managing a wide range of disabilities in libraries. Additionally, in the US, growing percentages of students with disabilities have been enrolling in postsecondary education over the past few decades,³ resulting in greater representation of students with disabilities among the overall population of undergraduate and graduate students.⁴

The issue of invisible disabilities is gaining increasing importance and awareness. It is impossible to know how many Americans live with mental health or cognitive disorders, reduced hearing or vision or mobility, learning differences, chronic disease, or other conditions that create difficulties in the performance of jobs and life tasks. Many individuals refrain from identifying their disabilities out of fear of job loss, discrimination, or simple unawareness that adjustments could make their lives more comfortable. It is essential that library workers develop an awareness of the full range of human difference in abilities in order to be best prepared to interact with all patrons and colleagues in a respectful, supportive, and inclusive manner.

Canadian and US Law Regarding Accessibility

In Canada, the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA, 2005) is a provincial Ontario legislation that is proactive in terms of setting out specific deadlines for compliance—outlining milestones that institutions are obliged to meet—such as making library print collections accessible on request (January 2015), ensuring that the institutional website meets accessibility criteria set out in WCAG 2.0 (January 2013, ongoing), and ensuring that staff have been trained to provide inclusive customer service to patrons of all abilities (January 2012). The Canadian Copyright Act also provides legal framework in the form of exceptions for institutions acting on behalf of individuals with disabilities. It is anticipated that the AODA legislation will ultimately be adopted nationally with provinces such as Manitoba and Nova Scotia slowly rolling out their provincial laws based on the AODA.

Most research library administrators in the United States are familiar with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The ADA, established in 1990, defines an individual with a disability “as a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others

as having such an impairment. The ADA does not specifically name all of the impairments that are covered.”⁵ The ADA “prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in employment, State and local government, public accommodations, commercial facilities, transportation, and telecommunications. It also applies to the United States Congress.”⁶

Compliance with the ADA regulations is an important goal for every library in the nation, whether public, special, or research in nature and focus. The American Library Association (ALA) recognizes that libraries may play a major role in the lives of patrons of all abilities; therefore, ALA has particularly emphasized providing inclusive services, removing structural barriers, stocking accessible library materials, integrating assistive technology, recruiting people with disabilities, and educating librarians on disability issues.⁷

Complaints about noncompliance with the ADA rules are investigated and, when necessary, acted upon by the US Department of Justice and the Department of Education. There already is a lengthy list of cases taken to court in the form of briefs, summary judgments, settlements, and other legal documents such as complaints before both departments, indicating that enforcement in this area is taken very seriously.⁸

The basics of physical accessibility for any library building include designated parking spaces in close proximity to the building, ramps if there are steps at entrances, low-energy or automatic door opening devices, and, of course, elevators if there is more than one floor in the building. As far as structural specifications for libraries are concerned, Section 8 of the ADA Accessibility Guidelines, effective January 1, 2009, covers most aspects of these, including reading and study areas, check-out areas, card catalogs, and magazine displays. Very definitive minimum measurements are listed for aisle space clearance (for the passage of wheelchairs) and the height of tables and displays, as well as other features of the library setting. The width of the stacks is also accounted for, although the height of stacks is not regulated.⁹

Universal design is a desirable goal for all libraries and all public buildings because, as the name implies, it serves everyone well—the very young, the very old, and those individuals both with and without disabilities.

In addition to the ADA regulations, another federal agency, the US Architectural and Transportation Barriers Compliance Board (ATBCB or Access Board) issues guidelines to ensure that buildings, facilities, and transit vehicles are both accessible and usable by individuals with disabilities.¹⁰ Universal design is a desirable goal for all libraries and all public buildings because, as the name implies, it serves everyone well—the very young, the very old, and those individuals both with and without disabilities.

Just as the physical aspects of accessibility must be carefully considered in any library construction or renovation, under Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act, the library’s electronic communications must also strive to be compliant with ADA website requirements to provide equal access. This is a somewhat complicated area because, since the Obama Administration is committed to increasing improving access to government information and data for all people, the most stringent regulations pertain to federal, state, and local governmental agencies, whereas the rules for the private sector are not as clearly stated. However, although there are as yet no specific published technical ADA requirements vis-à-vis the

Internet, the US Access Board recently released a proposed rule updating Section 508,¹¹ which gives a good sense of the direction the government is heading. There is still a level of risk for inaccessible websites, and many organizations have already been sued for noncompliance under the ADA. Nevertheless, there are guidelines produced by university webmasters that can be used as touchstones for research library website accessibility, e.g., Web Accessibility at the U-M (<http://hr.umich.edu/webaccess/>). The University of Michigan guide states: “Accessibility means making your site available to the widest possible audience—which includes able-bodied users. It is helpful to think of accessibility as being like its sibling, usability. In fact, it is impossible to separate the two, and improving one improves the other.” Additionally, ARL has developed a Web Accessibility Toolkit (<http://accessibility.arl.org/>) that illuminates model policies and resources for a wide range of digital accessibility issues. (See sidebar for more about the ARL Web Accessibility Toolkit.)

The ADA regulations serve as the locus where the staff of each library should start as they examine how effectively they are serving users and staff with disabilities. But if that is where the library stops, it fails to truly meet a goal of accessibility to all users. The library should reach above and beyond the letter of the law to achieve the true spirit of inclusiveness.

Web Accessibility Toolkit for Research Libraries

ARL maintains a Web Accessibility Toolkit for the ARL membership and the broader library community. The toolkit aims to:

- **Promote** the principles of accessibility, universal design, and digital inclusion.
- **Help** research libraries achieve digital accessibility.
- **Connect** research libraries with the tools, people, and examples they need to provide accessible digital content.

The Web Accessibility Toolkit provides library leaders with model policies, licensing language, a community of practice, and other resources to establish effective, accountable plans for meeting legal and ethical obligations to create an accessible, inclusive environment.

Try out the toolkit at <http://accessibility.arl.org/>.

Send comments or questions to accessibility@arl.org.

Library as Campus Leader

A research library is at the crossroad of its various constituencies. The library typically will serve a wide range of researchers from the most entry-level to the most advanced, from youthful to elderly. These researchers will need to use information available in digital, paper, and even micro-formats, and the information may be in the form of words, data, images, maps, audio, video, and more. The library provides consultations, classroom instruction, high-tech equipment, physical and virtual environments, and numerous other services suited to the needs of their user populations. How is it possible for a library

to be prepared for the intersection of researchers—who may have any of a number of disabilities of varying severity—with the array of services and resources the library provides? Attention, inclusion, awareness, flexibility, humility, and creativity will position the library to provide the best possible service with the potential to stand as a model for the institution as a whole.

A mental readjustment to focus on **accessibility and equity** and away from **disability and accommodation** is a shift from a problem-based model to one rooted in fairness instead. Accessibility should be at the front end of new innovations and programs, built into planning and design processes as a critical component of the model. Tacked on at the end, the opportunity to maximize effectiveness is lost as makeshift adjustments and add-ons reduce the likelihood of the fullest and most complete access. An example is the expanding move to use Google products in academic enterprises. Google did not consider accessibility in creating its popular e-mail, calendar, and other services. Now, as more and more institutions move to Google for a wide range of reasons—financial, user familiarity, general ease of use—post-hoc adjustments must be made for those who use assistive reading technology, since Google products do not work well with such tools.

While the idea of creating policies may seem contradictory to responding rapidly to user needs, the development or adoption of new technology and services could benefit from policies that insist on step-by-step evaluation of the match of these items to accessibility. When the newest aggregator database vendor assures a library's electronic resources officer that its database is fully accessible, it will be up to the buyer to confirm these claims. Details on the vendor's accessibility testing—for example, what software it used and how many users with disabilities were in its beta test group—should be ascertained and evaluated independent of the vendor's claims. Advocating the value of producing inclusive learning resources will help vendors keep accessibility in mind as they test product proposals with potential buyers is another way to be proactive. The library could also benefit by partnering with campus offices that serve students and faculty with disabilities to identify their own beta test group and hire them to evaluate and put new electronic resources through their paces.

When developing new services, building new facilities, or remodeling old ones, libraries should make it standard practice to include users with disabilities in planning stages. Users of all abilities can pinpoint issues pertaining to physical access that go beyond building codes. It is also good practice to engage with accessibility experts to help the library focus attention on providing maximum accessibility to the broadest possible range of users. It is not always possible for all groups to be represented; however, the library staff still have a responsibility to lobby for inclusivity in all areas of service delivery. Consideration of different experiences and perspectives can spark creative decisions that meet a wider range of needs, encouraging staff to develop “personas” throughout the process of designing a new interface or developing a new patron app. With specific accessibility policies firmly in place, planners of future initiatives will be reminded to be more inclusive, to the potential benefit of a much broader spectrum of researchers and library users.

No policy should ever stand in the way of good service. It should be a straightforward matter for research libraries to assure ready assistance to those who are unable to access book stacks, map cases, computer

workstations, etc. But what does the staff member do when asked to leave his or her work space to assist someone who appears to be fully able to manage on their own? Every library, of course, will vary somewhat in how to handle such requests. But all staff who are likely to interact with users need to learn about accessibility issues, including, and perhaps especially, invisible disabilities.

The Invisible Disabilities Association reports numerous stories of people with chronic fatigue, multiple sclerosis, Lyme disease, rheumatoid arthritis, chemical sensitivities, and other illnesses who are daily challenged about their use of parking spaces designated for “handicapped” users, or their requests for help to carry what may be seen as a very lightweight load.¹² A patron with no visible hearing aid may ask a reference staff person to speak up, while the reference staffer feels he or she is talking quite loudly enough. A student may need a library instructor to slow down or repeat instructions because the student’s cognitive process works differently from that of most other classmates. An otherwise fit woman may request help carrying a small stack of books, because her “frozen” shoulder does not allow her to move her arm. Staff who interact with the public, including student staff who may be the only ones available in the stacks, need to be aware of and sensitive to the possibility that they may be called upon to provide assistance—and users should not be expected or required to disclose or “out” themselves in order to satisfy the curiosity or puzzlement of staff. Another mental shift may take place here—this student is not lazy and this faculty member is not refusing to pay attention to your instructions and this post-doc is not behaving from a sense of privilege and demanding unreasonable service. They may truly need help.

How much support should library staff be trained to provide? This is a judgment call. Patron requests can range from quick questions to more time-consuming tasks. It is important to make sure that library services are designed to be flexible to meet the needs of diverse users, but it is also important to have policies in place to support staff in channeling time-consuming requests to the appropriate bodies within the organization or on campus. All library staff need to collaborate together on building more inclusive learning environments.

Cultural competency is as critical to providing excellent public service as high-level competency in information retrieval. Some library staff might learn the latter through trial and error, but if they are working at an information service point, it behooves the institution to be certain that staff have the necessary skills in information retrieval before they begin interacting with the public, and some libraries may require lengthy training periods and close oversight for new service providers. Unfortunately, libraries do not typically supply similarly robust training and oversight to instill cultural competencies around any differences staff may encounter at service points, in classrooms, or in office consultations, even though most American research institutions draw users from all over the world.

Training staff members to collaborate effectively while assisting researchers with disabilities is perhaps the most important initiative a library can take—one bad encounter with a staff member who is not knowledgeable or who acts inappropriately can permanently sour a patron’s relationship with the library, and word of mouth can easily give others a negative impression of the library even if they have never used its facilities or services personally. One common mistake of library staff reported by several blind library users is that they are not directly addressed when they are accompanied by a companion. Just as a

children's librarian may address a parent instead of the child who is actually doing the library project, the library staff member mistakenly talks to the researcher's companion as if the researcher cannot hear nor speak for him- or herself.

A similar situation sometimes occurs when the patron is a wheelchair user. If the staff member is standing, it helps to sit down, if possible, to be on the same level as the wheelchair user, rather than looming above. Care should also be taken to address deaf or hard of hearing patrons in the manner they prefer, whether through a sign-language interpreter or by enabling them to see the speaker's lips if they are comfortable with lip reading. Again, the library staff member should always address the patron as directly as possible.

Training in interacting with individuals with disabilities can be accomplished by specialists, by institutional or campus partners, and by those with disabilities themselves who are willing to share their views and explain what processes could be put in place to improve accessibility as well as enhance the entire library experience. The opportunity to have a human interaction is often why people come to the library to seek assistance rather than turning solely to Internet searches. Staff awareness, flexibility, and willingness to admit what they do not know—asking patrons how best to help them—can help to achieve the equity that libraries seek for all users in the interest of the best possible accessibility and fairness.

Finally, users must be made aware of library efforts at maximizing accessibility and inclusion. Friendly and effective outreach to communities in which individuals might think of libraries as nothing more than a series of strenuous barriers can encourage use. Making sure that appropriate and adequate parking is available, accessible entries are clearly marked (better yet, make all entries accessible), and building signage makes sense and is readable are all factors that signify that the library prioritizes accessibility and that patrons of all abilities are sincerely welcome. Certainly verifying that students with disabilities are aware of what the library can do for them is important, but faculty, staff, and other users should also know from handouts and readily available web information (that is not buried on the site many clicks deep) how they can make the most of library services. Given the existence of invisible disabilities, marketing should be managed in a way that makes researchers feel that they can “come as they are” and still get good, friendly, non-judgmental assistance from any library staff member they encounter.

Staff with Disabilities

As the Society for Human Resource Management noted in a webcast in the fall of 2013, “If you are a government contractor—and it's possible you may not even realize that you are—sweeping changes in your affirmative action obligations are heading your way. The US Department of Labor has unveiled new rules (under Section 4212 of Vietnam Era Veterans' Readjustment Assistance Act of 1974 and Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973) that impose new goals for hiring veterans and people with disabilities and requirements for collecting data on applicants, new hires and current employees. The workforce goal for disabled workers is 7 percent; the 'benchmark' for covered veterans is 8 percent; and, the Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs (OFCCP) has a roadmap for good faith efforts that may be a bumpy ride for federal contractors. The rules require solicitation of applicants to 'voluntarily self-identify,'

once they become applicants as is currently done with gender and race. And that means new forms, processes, and recordkeeping requirements.”¹³

Disabilities broadly defined by the ADA include physical, cognitive, and mental circumstances that have an impact on a person’s ability to accomplish day-to-day tasks, and some of these may be work-related tasks. Some research libraries are likely to be counted as government contractors and will start to see efforts and encouragement to increase employment of people with disabilities. Creating a welcoming, generally accessible work environment in advance will be more appealing to potential staff than promises that changes will be made later if they come to work for the library. Recruiting packets that go to any potential employee should include a number of relevant policies, including institutional or campus resources available to assist in providing appropriate modifications, assurance that disclosure of a specific diagnosis is not necessary for adjustments to be made, and assurance that the institution places a high value on the contributions of individuals with different experiences and viewpoints. This information should be available to **all** candidates, not only those identified as having a disability. It is important that physical requirements in job descriptions are accurate and essential functions to the position. Requirements should not be included to dissuade applicants with disabilities from applying for a particular position. Active recruitment and clear goals for inclusion are encouraging messages to all future employees.

Staff with invisible disabilities may hesitate to reveal them, and often job-advice websites encourage readers not to disclose their disability status before securing a job offer. Knowing from the start of the application process the library’s position to support staff of all abilities will ease the sense of vulnerability and diminish the fear of speaking up. Individuals may disclose their particular needs once employed, or they may make do without accommodations. However, if the library has begun to cultivate a climate of inclusion that considers disabilities as part of that portfolio, it may be easier for staff members to disclose their needs and receive appropriate accommodations that can help them to become their most productive selves.

Modifications to support staff with disabilities are often necessary, and some hiring employers may have concerns about the cost. Recent data suggest that the median cost for such adjustments is about US\$600¹⁴—probably not much more than the cost of equipment for any new staff member.

Conclusion

Whether working with library staff or patrons, to act inclusively means understanding the needs and concerns of people with disabilities, and also means knowing that generalizations do not apply to everyone with a similar disability. A wheelchair user may be able to stand and walk a little; a patron with a guide dog may be partially sighted and not entirely blind—be open-minded and let the patron or colleague tell you what is best for them.

The library is such a vital and pivotal center for so many people that it is incumbent upon its organizers, administration, and employees to make it the best possible venue for inclusiveness for all its staff and

patrons, regardless of their physical or emotional abilities and to provide a model for surrounding departments and units to follow.

Endnotes

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