

Creating Inclusive Library Environments

A planning guide for serving patrons with disabilities

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preface

IT IS OUR INTENTION TO PROVIDE A ROAD MAP FOR LIBRARIES SO THAT they may be proactive in creating inclusive library environments. As you review the accessibility of your library, this publication—and the discussions you have about it with others—will aid you in your quest to be truly inclusive.

A Personal Note from John

Collaborating on this project intrigued me because it combined the issue to which I have dedicated my professional life—helping those with disabilities—with one of the resources I have ardently utilized throughout my life—the library.

Growing up, my frequent visits to our public library were prompted by both necessity and the pursuit of enjoyment. The need to utilize library resources for school projects was an absolute requirement. As one of nine children, I sought the many resources I needed, as well as the library's peace and quiet, which was also not available at home. When I was old enough, I would walk the mile to our town library and become happily lost in the books and magazines. I have always loved music, so it was a revelation to me that I could check out different types of media and listen to new artists in the days when my boyhood jobs did not provide enough discretionary income to purchase these items myself.

The library continued to be my one-stop destination for information and resources throughout high school and college. Each time I entered its doors, I crossed into another world and experienced a sense of calm. When the library began offering films to rent, it became my standard practice to stock up on movies for the weekend.

Those library trips eventually included my wife and children. It was a basic part of our routine to travel to the library together and then disperse to different areas of the building to investigate whatever sparked our interest on that particular day.

An important rite of passage for both my son and my daughter was to receive their first library cards. Even back then, I smiled when I remembered one of my professors in graduate school who would require that his children do research on the location of their upcoming family vacation. This also required use of a new library at their destination, an excellent excuse to practice their skills.

Which audio book to listen to on a family drive was always a highly debated subject. And sometimes, when we had a clear winner, we'd arrive at our destination still engrossed in the story and reluctant to leave the car.

Some of the joys I still have to this day are to enter a library, to browse what is new, to see what peaks my interest, and to recall why I went to the library in the first place. I'm sure I'm not alone in this experience. Many users visit the library with a particular goal in mind. Once that goal is achieved, they may stay longer because they have consciously or unconsciously given themselves permission to linger among the books, journals, magazines, or movies.

My professional life has focused on championing the rights of individuals with disabilities and helping businesses and organizations understand these rights. This project seemed a natural fit, considering my vocation for disability resources and my love and respect for the many services offered by libraries.

A Personal Note from Michelle

I too escaped to the library anytime being at home got boring or tedious. I rode my small, red ten-speed bicycle to the only two places I was allowed—the libraries on either side of town. It was my freedom! Even as a teenager I was clearly more out of shape than John, because a 1.5 mile ride each way tired me out for the rest of the night. I'm pretty sure everyone at home actually liked it that way.

Riding eastward on the side of the road, through a slow series of traffic lights in the commercial part of downtown, I ended up at my local public library. I had just moved into town, and suddenly I needed sources for a research report for school. I was directed to the children's room as a fifth

grader, but quickly exhausted the nonfiction offerings there. It was suddenly official—I was no longer a child, and the library was my proof.

Once I had the official green reciprocal borrowing sticker on my adult library card—which at the time seemed more valuable than real money—I branched out. I rode my bike westward instead, down a flat and straight but busy suburban street, to the public library of the town next door. Here I stuffed books, music, and fliers into yellow plastic bags like a crazed supermarket checker. I then attempted to ride home (never in a straight line) with the bags in one hand and handlebars in the other. It’s a wonder I never got run over.

As an adult, I absolutely never ride my bike and I don’t miss it one bit. But I still love my library card and I still entertain myself—after working all day in a library, mind you—by going to the public library . . . any and all, near, and far. If you are accompanying me at any time, you may also be asked to take my photo in front of the nearest library sign, so consider yourself forewarned.

I guess I never really knew much about disabilities until I started teaching more than twenty years ago. My K-12 students had physical or learning disabilities, often accompanied by second-language challenges and personality disorders. Until then, the people with disabilities that I had encountered were patrons of the public library, customers at the supermarket, or neighbors. Suddenly it became my professional responsibility to understand them, and that was when my learning curve really accelerated.

As I grew older, my own family began to include members who have such disabilities as autism spectrum disorders, blindness, genetic and developmental disorders, physical disabilities, early-onset dementia, and speech-language impairments. While it was unusual at first to encounter these conditions because they had not been common in my family, dealing with the challenges of disabilities became a normal part of life.

I have learned from personal experience that advocacy turned into action is indeed the best way we can support others. When you truly understand, your actions speak a special kind of language that communicates your respect, empathy, and love all at once.

Format of this Book

This book provides the reader with an easy-to-use guide to valuable strategies and resources related to disability and access issues that are specifically

related to libraries. In each chapter we will explore a variety of themes and highlight best practices recommended for libraries to follow in order to create a more inclusive and barrier-free environment. Resources at the end of each chapter point to additional information on each topic.

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Introduction to Creating Inclusive Libraries

EFFECTIVE EDUCATORS, LIBRARIANS, AND MANY OTHER ADVOCATES help to create inclusive environments on a daily basis. We hope this book will help you continue to learn new ways to reach and teach others.

Sometimes those we teach are in elementary, middle, and high schools. At other times, we work with young adults in college, or adults who may be raising families and participating in the workforce, or retirees in our local communities. A great many more users will defy these traditional categories, in as many ways as there are individuals. Yet as we meet all of these unique and valuable people, we naturally come to realize that all share the same needs—to understand and to be understood.

Libraries can connect people with mentors, role models, and new ideas that fuel their growth. Many times, library staff members can take on leader-

For Your Information

We can all identify a mentor who helped us understand or learn something new about the world or about ourselves. These dedicated educators helped us navigate the world by

- Modeling appropriate behavior, and correcting us when necessary.
- Sharing information, advice, or perspective to help us see new things.
- Remaining unwavering in their encouragement of our growth.

For Your Information

As we take what we have learned from mentors and apply it to our own lives, we are able to help others by

- Participating in our communities, organizations, and institutions, in order to ensure that educational opportunities exist for everyone.
- Teaching, administering, counseling, and supporting our users within various institutions, from our local universities to our global multinational companies.
- Remaining unwavering in our commitment to improving our society.

ship roles in addressing issues of disability within their communities. Since information resources help us to develop as humans in complex relationships, as well as to appreciate the development of others, libraries easily become a source of lifelong learning for everyone.

By engaging with an individual and establishing rapport, a mentor is able to evaluate the level of need, to establish a frame of reference for the relationship, and to provide resources for further learning. Library staff members therefore become natural educators and mentors who are able to meet and greet users, to determine their level of interest and skill, and to help them decide where to start navigating the library or refining their information needs. These mentoring skills are invaluable in creating relationships with all types of patrons, and in sustaining these relationships over time.

Librarians and users alike share a certain kinship within the library environment. Whether helping or being helped, library users report that these relationships usually result in a positive library experience when each user's needs are met. Libraries that encourage the development of these human and information resources are indeed leaders in creating welcoming environments for further education and gainful employment, the cornerstones of self-sufficiency and independence that we all have come to expect as members of a democratic society.

This book is in honor of all of you who shared your expertise with us through your excellent library service, your presentation and teaching, or your writing. Please continue to share so that we all may continue to learn.

The Americans with Disabilities Act at Twenty-Five

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) defines a disability as a mental or physical condition that causes a substantial limitation. This definition is significantly restricted as to the condition, manner, or duration when compared to the condition, manner, or duration under which the average person in the general population can perform any major life activity.

It has been more than twenty-five years since the ADA became law in 1990. With the passage of the ADA, significant progress was made in the physical accessibility of buildings and all public places such as restaurants and libraries. Libraries became accessible in many more ways, from parking spaces to sidewalks, curb cuts, ramps, and automatic doors leading into the buildings. It is also more common for indoor furnishings and facilities to comply. Library desks, tables, and bathrooms are made to be fully accessible to accommodate persons with physical disabilities. Most elevators and doors have Braille signage for those with visual impairments. And online access to library holdings, as well as software and hardware that help to achieve this, have been evolving ever since.

Years before the ADA was signed in to law, many champions of the disability-rights movement laid the groundwork for improving access for persons with disabilities. Remembering their courage, sacrifices, and determination helps us to create and maintain a world in which today's heroes encourage everyday acts of tolerance, acceptance, and kindness.

The ADA of 2008

Eighteen years after the ADA went into effect, the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act (ADAAA) was signed into law in 2008. The catalyst for



For Your Information

So who is considered to be an individual with a disability under the ADA?
A person who

- Has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of his or her major life activities.
- Has a record of such an impairment.
- Is regarded as having such an impairment.

the new legislation was the need to get closer to the original intent of the law. The ADAAA made important changes to the definition of the term “disability” by rejecting the claims in several Supreme Court decisions and clarifying portions of the previous ADA regulations of the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC).

These changes made it easier for individuals seeking protection under the ADA to qualify as eligible for accommodations due to a disability within the definition provided by the ADA. EEOC’s “Fact Sheet of Final Regulations Implementing the ADAAA” was published in the *Federal Register* in 2011, and now appears online at www.eeoc.gov/laws/regulations/adaaa_fact_sheet.cfm. It has become the go-to document for explaining these changes.

Furthermore, the ADAAA emphasizes that the definition of disability should be construed in favor of broad coverage of individuals to the maximum extent permitted by the terms of the ADA, and generally should not require extensive analysis. One of the significant changes that resulted from the ADAAA is that it left open the interpretation of who would qualify as having a “disability.”

For example, an individual with a history of cancer who is currently in remission would be covered under the new regulations. Another key change made it easier for individuals to establish coverage under ADAAA specifically within the “regarded as” part of the definition of “disability.” These changes also affected who might qualify as eligible for reasonable accommodations on the job or in places of public accommodation.

Overview of Barrier-Free Strategies

When an environment like a library, a classroom, or a retail shop is said to be barrier-free, it is easily negotiated by everyone, including those who have disabilities. In other words, no special actions on the part of the person with a disability are needed in order to use, experience, or engage in any aspect of that environment. Specifically, when nothing in particular keeps any person from accessing a resource, service, or place, those places can be described as “barrier-free” or by similar terms like “accessible” or “universally designed.”

Accessibility relates to minimizing the differences between persons with and without disabilities who engage with the library environment. Library buildings should be showcases of accessible public spaces via careful design



Checklist

Start the conversation about accommodating disabilities in your library:

- Determine your organization's background knowledge of abilities and disabilities.
- Identify a plan for facilities that includes new and existing functions.
- Review policies and procedures that identify relevant actions and activities.

and upgrade of their structure and interiors. Many libraries have updated furniture, equipment, and entryways in recent years, and there are many exciting examples of reimaged and newly designed spaces in libraries, schools, and other places. A great number of libraries have already implemented book shelving that is wide enough to accommodate electric wheelchairs, or have redesigned service desks so that their surfaces are now more comfortable for patrons who must remain seated. While these major improvements are often visible to even the most casual library users, examining the subtler aspects of your library facility may also reveal new opportunities and strategies for upgrades. For example, additional adjustments to the physical environment of the library might include more sensitive controls for lighting, noise, or air flow. Mechanical room-darkening shades may not only help an audience see a Microsoft PowerPoint presentation more clearly, but may also help to influence the behavior of children with disabilities during story times.

Classical music, played through strategically located speakers, which can be directed to or removed from a particular area of the library, might create a relaxing atmosphere and simultaneously help to soothe the nerves of restless teenagers. Specific facility improvements and options are explored further in chapter 3, *Setting Up Facilities*.

Policies and procedures are essential in creating a barrier-free library environment, and they must cover many types of situations. On college campuses, for example, students with service animals are required to register with the office of disability resources. Usually, service animals are permitted in such places such as the college residence halls, the cafeteria, classrooms, and of course the library. However, some users may bring animals that do not qualify as service animals into a public, school, or special library, so policies must be in place to help govern these actions. In addition, users are also not required to



For Your Information

The US Department of Labor reminds us that, when communicating with people who have disabilities, we should

- Relax.
- Treat the individual with dignity, respect, and courtesy.
- Listen to the individual.
- Offer assistance, but do not insist or be offended if your offer is not accepted.

register their animals in advance of entering any other place of public accommodation, further complicating staff decision making about the best courses of action. Therefore, the many details of library policies must be discussed and put into place to govern the behavior of library users as well as that of library staff, which is the focus of chapter 2, *Writing Policies and Procedures*.

By conducting your own research in library sources, and considering your experiences and those of knowledgeable colleagues or experts, you will be able to begin thinking about developing materials that help others to learn about accessibility. For example, the staff of the Disability Resources Center at Rowan University created fact sheets to distribute to our employees that describe the most common physical and invisible disabilities among our particular community of users, which currently include auditory processing disorders, post-traumatic stress disorders, traumatic brain injuries, and hearing and visual impairments.

Fact sheets like these can be created by your own organization and customized for your particular needs. They may be used as resources for training and disability-awareness sessions, along with other training materials for new employees or for refresher sessions for returning employees. Links to organizations and videos for further information can also be provided to serve as companion resources for teachers and support staff. These disability fact sheets can be invaluable in heightening awareness of specific disabilities and best practices to support and understand individuals in the classroom and to provide full access to their educational experiences. Information on these and other types of strategies for service improvements are addressed in chapter 4, *Training Library Staff*.

Sometimes library staff may not always know what type of help a library user might want, and must also realize that sometimes users explicitly don't

**Checklist**

To prepare for effective library operations:

- Explicitly train staff by demonstrating effective interactions.
- Address negative perceptions and misconceptions early and often.
- Empower both employees and library users to make appropriate decisions.

want help. For example, an elderly person staring at the large-print fiction shelf for a long time might unwittingly prompt a staff member to interrupt his browsing like a retail worker at the mall trying to interact with a shopper. Not every patron action demands a reaction from library staff.

The staff member might not realize that a user is just fine, and may be reading slowly because she forgot her glasses or has dyslexia, not because she does not know how to use the library. Similarly, there may be other reasons that a user may be looking at the shelf for a long while, or pausing in a seemingly frozen position before reaching from his wheelchair for an item. It may be that he just can't decide whether he is interested in historical fiction or if he has already read the fourth James Patterson novel, not because he has mobility issues. Again, sensitivity is key.

Because persons with disabilities interact with libraries on a daily basis, it is important that library staff have the training necessary to feel confident and comfortable providing assistance. One way to promote effective communications and positive interactions with persons with disabilities would be to use recommended first-person language. Determining the appropriate language to use in advance of meeting users with disabilities will ensure that staff members are addressing, assisting, and accommodating each user in an appropriate manner. To provide the reader with strategies for communicating with persons with disabilities, user engagement is explored further in chapter 5, *Maintaining Daily Operations*.

Libraries are often the central hub where students gather to study or users visit to do research or to check out specific resources for later study. For this reason, the library environment presents an ideal opportunity to showcase disability-related themes throughout the year.

An example of outreach might be a partnership with an institution for incarcerated youth or a workshop sponsored by the local health clinic. When we think of the disenfranchised, we often may not remember that people

with disabilities may also be members of this group. Staff members from other institutions are usually very receptive to activities, programs, and outreach that meet mutual goals.

Alternately, suggesting general ways to work together and specific projects (with details of whom might be involved) are excellent opportunities to widen the library's impact. More ideas on how to involve others in removing barriers for people with disabilities are elaborated in chapter 6, Collaboration and Outreach.

Another way in which libraries can be advocates in creating inclusive environments would be to host events and speakers during themed months throughout the year. Library staff can design workshops, programming opportunities, open houses, and tours of the library that explicitly highlight new assistive technologies, tips, or resources available to persons with disabilities.

Professional conferences and publications provide opportunities to identify possible speakers and trainers, although library staff members and community users will also have significant expertise in many potential topics for workshops. Additional suggestions for events and showcase activities are provided in chapter 7, Programming and Workshop Ideas.

In order to serve the many users who do not set foot in a library building, accessible web pages and accessible information literary tutorials are essential. Many academic and public library websites make digital access easier by having obvious links at the top of their home pages that lead to the most-requested resources. Such design features can save valuable time when navigat-



Checklist

Consider some of these activities to promote awareness:

- Workshops that teach a particular interpersonal strategy, such as conflict resolution
- Lessons that explain a useful skill, such as Mac OS keyboard shortcuts or Microsoft Windows accessibility features
- Displays that raise awareness and can be perused at will, such as showcases of artifacts from ADA history, or tabletop stands with new books about disabilities
- Speakers who relay their experiences and offer solutions to problems, for example, an advanced library user who has a disability, or a representative from a partner organization



Checklist

How to foster an inclusive institution:

- Procure shared commitment.
- Draft a concrete policy and plan.
- Provide sufficient support for personnel.
- Perform ongoing evaluation.

ing the website and will greatly increase repeat visits for digital access to library materials.

Some libraries also have opportunities to become the primary location for students with disabilities to check out adaptive equipment and assistive technology when convenient, often because of their longer hours of

operation. These items are available in a central location, and assistance for using both new and traditional types of equipment is available. More ideas for offering accessible options can be found in chapter 8, Accessible Resources and Technologies.

Libraries can become advocates in creating inclusive environments through programming opportunities, open houses, and tours of the library that highlight new assistive technology and resources available to persons with disabilities. Simultaneously, library culture must be infused with new strategic plans related to improving strategies that encode empathy and action into the organizational culture.

Developing new traditions, adjusting the language we use in person and in writing, and improving the spaces in which we provide our materials and services are ways in which libraries can ensure that their brands are inclusive. By examining, maintaining, and strategically influencing the beliefs and behaviors of the organization, the library is able to affect the tone and tenor of its entire community. For more ideas on how to effect strategic change, see chapter 9, Developing a User-Centered Culture.

Keeping current is a vitally important aspect of librarianship, and a necessity for all educators. Reading about emerging technologies and trends, and experiencing a variety of specific resources and technologies, will aid you and your library in advocating for persons with disabilities. Similarly, seeking out current research and applying its recommendations will help ensure that you are implementing best practices, and not just acting on the opinions of others. Maintaining contact with those at other libraries and other types of organizations that serve people with disabilities will help to broaden your awareness of available information. In “How to Foster an Inclusive Institution,” for example, the Association of Research Libraries (1994) reminds us of steps

we could take every day. Ways to find these ideas and more are addressed in chapter 10, Keeping Up to Date.

The everyday needs of library users vary greatly. Therefore, the design of inclusive library environments is essential to meet the diverse needs of all library users, not just those identified as having a disability. Inclusiveness goes beyond a best practice or universal design. It is a welcoming atmosphere that keeps users coming back because of a positive experience and excellent customer service in addition to the access of limitless library resources.

Libraries as Employers

Libraries are not the only institutions trying to identify ways to accommodate users with disabilities. Corporations, government offices, professional organizations, and many types of institutions are also seeking ways to comply with federal regulations. Furthermore, in addition to serving people with disabilities, libraries of all types employ people with disabilities. Libraries will act as a resource to provide other employers and employees with information on this topic.

Consider the case of Hal Godwin from Philadelphia Electric Company (PECO), who many consider to be one of the pioneers in the area of disability awareness training in his community. Hal served on the Philadelphia Committee for the Employment of Persons with Disabilities. As a young engineer, Hal—a wheelchair user—was the first individual with a severe disability hired by PECO. According to Hal, he was called by Human Resources to schedule his interview. The day he arrived for his interview, he had no way to access the building. Not to be deterred, Hal recruited two volunteers to carry him and his wheelchair up the steps and into the building to meet his interviewer.

Hal was hired. In addition to a successful career with PECO, he was considered an advocacy champion because of his commitment to working to raise disability awareness of employers throughout Pennsylvania. After his retirement from PECO, Hal was honored as a Top Pennsylvanian by the Pennsylvania Governor's Committee on the Employment of Persons with Disabilities in recognition of his commitment to promoting the value of employing persons with disabilities.

Hal's involvement with the Pennsylvania Office of Vocational Rehabilitation as a Windmills trainer was one example of his commitment to chang-



For Your Information

Using the clever acronym ADEPT, Pimentel's (2001) strategy provided a roadmap for preparation of your workplace for people with disabilities:

- A—Anticipate barriers, problems, and employer concerns.
- D—Develop solutions and strategies.
- E—Educate participants to present themselves effectively to the employer.
- P—Prepare the employer to work efficiently with people with disabilities.
- T—Transition the job seeker into a successful employee through retention strategies.

ing the attitudes of employers and promoting disability awareness in hiring practices among employers in the region. Windmills, developed by Richard Pimentel, was a disability awareness training program popular in the 1980s. The program provided employers with a full week of materials to immerse their employees in simulations of having disabilities. For example, employers could spend a day or more in a wheelchair, or blindfolded to simulate being visually impaired. The Windmills training model was used by many government agencies, and large and small companies as well as employer organizations.

Pimentel is seen as one of the early champions of the disability-rights movement. In addition to creating his disability training program Tilting at Windmills, he authored *Working with People with Disabilities in a Job Placement/Job Retention Environment*, which offered both employers and job developers practical advice and strategies for communicating with, and preparing their workplace for, new employees with disabilities.

Libraries are in a unique position to model for other organizations the appropriate systems and processes for employing persons with disabilities. And when and if we fail to provide appropriate services, accommodations, or communication, this feedback helps us determine what additional information would be needed to help others avoid our mistakes. In developing collections that reflect the best practices of our society, and in trying to follow those practices on a daily basis, libraries can become beacons of equity in their communities.

Universal Design

In creating a more inclusive library environment, it becomes essential to employ universal design principles because they are a cornerstone in ensuring equal access for all users. Universal design, a concept and term widely used today, was first coined by Ronald L. Mace, an architect with North Carolina State University. Also referred to as “inclusive design,” it takes a look at all environments, such as buildings and products, as items that should be designed with all types of people in mind—young and old, with and without disabilities.



For Your Information

The 7 Principles of universal design from North Carolina State University’s Center for Universal Design (2014):

Principle 1: Equitable Use

The design works for everyone, resulting in the same type of use, outcome, or benefits without alienating any particular group or individual.

Principle 2: Flexibility in Use

The design allows for individual preferences, customization, or options to be set by the user.

Principle 3: Simple and Intuitive Use

The design is obviously understandable by all, at any given time, and for any given skill level.

Principle 4: Perceptible Information

The design itself helps people know how to use the item or service, and does not require additional explanations, directions, or training in order to understand or participate.

Principle 5: Tolerance for Error

The design is a result of advance troubleshooting, and has minimized the number of things that could go wrong during use.

Principle 6: Low Physical Effort

The design promotes efficiency, comfort, and ease of use by everyone.

Principle 7: Size and Space for Approach and Use

The design accommodates users of all shapes and sizes, in an appropriately sized space.

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