

7-15-2022

Accessibility and Public Services - Part 2: When Being User Focused Includes All Users

Annie Bélanger
Grand Valley State University, belange1@gvsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/library_sp



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

ScholarWorks Citation

Bélanger, Annie, "Accessibility and Public Services - Part 2: When Being User Focused Includes All Users" (2022). *Scholarly Papers and Articles*. 73.
https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/library_sp/73

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Libraries at ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scholarly Papers and Articles by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Column Title: Perspectives on Public Services

Column Editor: Annie Bélanger, Dean of University Libraries, Grand Valley State University, Allendale, MI, USA belange1@gvsu.edu

COLUMN EDITOR'S NOTES: This column examines advances in public-facing library services. The focus is on how broadly framed library services evolve and impact users as well as how diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility, usability, and leadership advance service development. The column seeks to bring a broader viewpoint of public services as all services impacting users, beyond traditionally viewed public services such as instruction and education, programming, and circulation. The strength of the column is its broad, international focus and contributors are encouraged to explore issues and recent advances in public services relevant to their geographical region as well as the larger global audience. Interested authors are invited to submit proposals and articles to the column editor Annie Bélanger at belange1@gvsu.edu.

Contribution Title: Accessibility and Public Services - Part 2: When Being User Focused Includes All Users

Contribution Author: Annie Bélanger, Dean of University Libraries, Grand Valley State University, Allendale, MI, USA @annie_belanger

ABSTRACT: Libraries serve an important role in accessing information, delivering services, and fostering a sense of community. Libraries must ask whether they are serving all of their community members equitably. People with disabilities need to be able to access the libraries fully. This article first provides an overview of approaches for moving beyond compliance in the development and delivery of services to people with disabilities. It explores barriers to accessing services for people with disabilities and ways to overcome them. Lastly, it outlines daily interaction tips in providing service to people with disabilities.

Keywords: Libraries, Accessibility, User Services, Disability, Interactions, User Experience

Introduction

As posited in my previous column (Bélanger, 2022), also referred to as Part 1, libraries and librarians are critical to accessing information and services as well as fostering a sense of community for many. As they seek to fulfill their service mission, libraries must continually interrogate if they are providing services equitably for the members of their communities. In doing so, they need to further consider the needs of people with disabilities for whom access encompasses more facets of service delivery that are both targeted and universally beneficial. Often, the calls for services for people with disability focus on ensuring equal opportunity of access for these library users. Yet, in conceiving and implementing services for people with

disabilities, libraries need to ensure that this is done in a manner that preserves self-dignity and fosters independence.

In the previous column (Bélanger, 2022), I outlined an overview of accessibility history in the US, Canada and Ontario, and Australia in order to outline major disability related legislation in parts of the world post WWII as well as the difference between the medical and social model of disability and its relationship to services to people with disabilities. Lastly, I will provide an overview of the history of libraries. I was interested in cementing the moral, ethical, and legal reasons which have impacted the way we approach services to people with disabilities.

“Universal Design is the design and composition of an environment so that it can be accessed, understood and used to the greatest extent possible by all people regardless of their age, size, ability or disability.” (Centre for Excellence in Universal Design, n.d.) When libraries leverage universal design principles in service and policy development, they reduce the need to provide accommodations by proactively reducing barriers to access. As stated in the previous column (Bélanger, 2022), “It is still important to acknowledge that sometimes accommodations are still needed, and in some countries are protected as a human right. In considering accommodations, the needs and preferences of the users with disabilities should be centered in our approach.”

In this column, I want to cement an approach to library service and policy development through the use of an equity lens as well as universal design principles in order to advance services for people with disabilities. As a way to increase our ability to foster accessibility in the Libraries, I will also explore resources that move beyond compliance through intentional planning of our policies, our practices, and more. Lastly, I will explore training towards accessibility and practical daily interactions approaches.

Increasing Accessibility in Service Delivery

People with disabilities encompass a broad range of ability, identity, and visibility of the disability. It is critical that library colleagues not presume a person's limits based on the disability. Rather, we can grow our knowledge of barriers in order to reduce them as well as deepen our ability to address them as they arise. In conceptualizing services, dismantling barriers will allow users to access them without disclosure, with independence, with dignity, with self-sufficiency, and with equal opportunity. In other words, accessibility can be reframed as minimizing the differences in the ways that people with disabilities and those without interact with the library environment. (Kowalsky & Woodruff, 2017, p. 5)

In the previous column article (Bélanger, 2022), I explored the various types of barriers. Here, I will layer some baseline questions to ask ourselves in order to begin to address these barriers. These questions are inspired by previous work based knowledge as well as an equity lens (Nonprofit of Oregon, 2018), which is a set of questions that we can ask ourselves when we plan, develop, and evaluate policies, programs, decisions, and even our daily approach to our work.

- Attitudinal - These are the most basic and refer to attitudes, stereotypes, stigma, prejudice, and discrimination.
 - Whose voice is centered?
 - Whose voice is missing?
 - What assumptions about users are we making, and why?
 - What evidence supports our approach?
 - How are we preparing our frontline colleagues to interact with users with disabilities?
- Physical and architectural - These are structural components that prevent access. Consider a sidewalk without a curb cut or a multi-story building without an elevator.
 - Are we meeting the building codes that enable accessible spaces? How might we exceed to ensure the widest possible accessibility?
 - How would someone with limited mobility navigate this space?
 - Can someone with limited strength navigate this space?
 - Can someone with limited sight navigate the space safely?
 - How accommodating is our furniture for different abilities and body types?
 - What is our process for addressing space disruptions?
- Information or communications - These are experienced by those with disabilities that impact hearing, speaking, reading, writing, and understanding.
 - “What specific communication strategies ensure [users with disabilities] are heard and reached?” (Nonprofit of Oregon, 2018)
 - Can they easily understand what we are saying in our communications if they have a limited reading comprehension? How might we increase the use of plain language communications? (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020)
 - In considering the website:
 - Can someone easily identify a way to contact us?
 - Is our link text clear?
 - Is our signage accessible to someone with low or no vision?
 - Are our videos accessible to someone with auditory loss and/or vision loss?
 - Can someone receive accessible format alternatives in a reasonable time? (University of Waterloo Libraries, n.d.)
 - How might our program leverage Universal Design for Learning?
- Technological - These are created by how technology is created and impact those with motor impairments and vision loss.
 - In considering the website, can someone:
 - Adjust it for size and contrast?
 - Navigate it without a mouse?
 - Navigate it with a screen reader?
 - Interact with it with assistive technologies in a logical manner?
 - Access alternative text for images that support meaning making?
 - How is the technology in our spaces supporting users with disabilities?
 - If using touchscreens, what are the alternatives for users with disabilities?
- Systemic or policy -
 - What barriers might our policies create?

- Do our emergency procedures ensure the safety of users with disabilities?
- Can someone receive help in the stacks?
- What stereotypes might we (un)consciously be using in making our decisions? (EPIC Assist, 2021)
- Do we have clear library policies that pertain to users with disabilities? (Brunskill, Lantz, & Mundle, 2021)

By leveraging an equity lens, libraries can create teams that are relevant and representative of the community they serve as well as collectively address systemic barriers and inequities in the library environment, whether physical, virtual, or relational.

Resources for Moving Beyond Compliance by Planning for Accessibility

Moving beyond legal compliance for users with disabilities towards accessibility and equal opportunity requires us to examine our policies, procedures, and practices. To anchor the following content, here are some working definitions:

- Policies and guidelines: what we intend to do, including any rules for staff and users
- Procedures: in reflecting policies, describe how services and programs will be provided, and at times, articulate the steps staff are expected to take in certain situations
- Practices: what we do on a day-to-day basis, including how your staff actually offer or deliver services, may be informal or written

In order to center accessibility and inclusion in our policies, guidelines, procedures, and practices, libraries must include accessibility as part of their planning processes and not simply an afterthought to ensure legal compliance and thereby mitigate legal risk. Over time, library accessibility advocates have created many resources to help plan for and create accessible libraries. Many of these are very specific to a particular area of the library. For the purpose of this article, I will focus on the more general resources that can support libraries' efforts in moving beyond compliance.

In 2003, the National Endowment for the Arts published a guide, *Design for Accessibility*, to assist cultural organizations to foster inclusion for people with disabilities in the United States. The first chapter focuses on planning with inclusion as the goal, outlining key areas of focus to achieve accessibility: review of procedures and interactions, appointing an accessibility coordinator, assessing the accessibility of buildings and grounds, accessibility of meetings and events, design of materials, accessibility of the website, accessibility of communication systems, and respectful programming. (National Endowment for the Arts, 2003, pg. 7) Later, they created an *Accessibility Planning and Resource Guide for Cultural Administrators*, which provides practical implementation advice such as a checklist to use in evaluating the organization's accessibility. While these guides focus on cultural institutions with an arts focus, the planning advice translates readily to libraries who serve as cultural centers in many communities.

IFLA Standing Committee of Libraries Serving Disadvantaged Persons created the Access to libraries for persons with disabilities checklist as “a practical tool for all types of libraries (public, academic, school, special) to 1) assess existing levels of accessibility to buildings, services, materials and programs and to 2) enhance accessibility where needed.” (Irvall and Nielsen, 2005) Like many other authors, Irvall and Nielsen (2005) found that while some improvements require quite a bit of money, such as adding an elevator, many impactful changes can be made with little or no costs. In line with the use of an equity lens, they recommended that people with disabilities and affiliated support organizations be involved in the library’s evaluation process (2005).

Wentz, Jaeger, and Bertot (2015) articulated an inclusive future of libraries for persons with disabilities by exploring equity and inclusion for users with disabilities. The book explores many practical efforts to advance accessibility through a series of case studies. They wished to highlight the role of libraries in accessibility and that “a motto of access for all will enable libraries to expand their significant contributions to human rights and social justice that extend beyond the traditional physical infrastructure and space of libraries.” (p. 237) It covers the broader international context of libraries and accessibility.

In 2017, Kowalsky and Brown wrote *Creating Inclusive Library Environments: A Planning Guide for Serving Patrons with Disabilities* in the hope “to provide a roadmap for libraries so that they may be proactive in creating inclusive library environments” (p.vii) The book covers all library programmatic areas from policy-writing and procedures, facilities, staff training, services, web presence, daily operations, outreach, programming, resources and technologies, and lastly, creating a user-centered culture. As a practical path forward, they recommend the creation of fact sheets about different types of disabilities and how to provide services, which can be used in training materials. (p. 7) Most importantly, their work addresses that while policies must be updated to match our values and commitments to accessibility, it is often the procedural enforcement of the policies as well as implicitly known daily practices that can be problematic by creating uneven enforcement or support (p. 32); this lack of clear expectations is rife with the possibility of bias and exclusion. In supporting accessibility, it becomes critical that the implicit is made explicit in order to create shared understanding across the library. While anchored in the context of the United States, it also provides advice applicable in other jurisdictions.

In 2019, the Australian Library and Information Association created *Guidelines on library and information services for people with disabilities*, with the aim “to provide all libraries, regardless of type, size or resourcing, with minimum standards for the provision of accessible and inclusive services for people with disabilities.” (2019, p.1) It provides guidelines for libraries to assess their service levels, facilitate future-focused planning, and to create strategies to deliver more effective services for people with disabilities. Centered in the Australian context, it covers policies and planning, physical spaces, services, communications, marketing, outreach, budgeting, collection development and management, human resources and training, and advocacy. These high-level guidelines are helpful to all libraries seeking to understand at a high-level the requirements for accessibility in specific areas.

Training for Accessible Libraries

JJ Pionke's study (2020) found that many library employees experience frustration, uncertainty, and fear in considering how to provide services to users with disabilities. Further, he found that "69.91% of respondents marked that they were extremely interested or very interested in training about disability and accessibility." (Pionke, 2020) His study explored what types of training were most important to library employees' ability to deliver accessible services and programming:

- Empowered decision making to provide flexibility in meeting the needs of users with disabilities
- Understanding the policies and their context
- Assistive technologies
- Interacting with users with disabilities along with a baseline understanding of different disabilities and the associated needs
- People-centered communications

These findings are also demonstrated in Kowalsky and Woodruff work. (2017)

In considering my personal work experience in leading public services as well as services for persons with disabilities, I suggest that training first focus on an understanding of the need for accessibility beyond the legal requirements and then quickly move to focus on communications and identifying barriers so that a welcoming, accessible environment can be created.

- In developing communications training, focus on the following learning outcomes:
 - Interacting comfortably with all library users, taking possible disabilities into account
 - Welcoming persons using assistive devices and know how to use assistive devices provided at a basic level
 - Welcoming service animals, and understand the rules that govern them
 - Welcoming support persons and interacting with the user as the focus
 - Understanding ways to communicate with people with disabilities
- In developing barriers-identification training, focus on the following learning outcomes:
 - Providing notice of temporary service disruptions, such as an elevator in disrepair
 - Proactively identifying and reporting barriers
 - Knowing what to do when someone encounters a barrier, such as whom to speak to

While the above training recommendations focus largely on interactions with users with disabilities, deeper training may be required for others based on their roles within the library. Leaders and managers need to understand how to plan with accessibility in mind, leverage universal design principles for space planning, incorporate universal design of learning for programming and communications planning, and mitigate bias in planning processes. Library employees planning, designing, and delivering programming need to be aware of accessible programming, creating welcoming spaces, fostering accessible events, and how to question programming decisions' impacts on users with disabilities. Library facilities planners and maintenance employees need to understand physical accessibility as well as local building

codes. Lastly, those in charge of the library's web presence need to be trained in web accessibility and usability.

Accessible Daily Service Interactions

Every interaction is an opportunity for accessible service! (Library Accessibility Services - University of Waterloo Library, 2007) While some disabilities are visible, many are invisible; creating a reality where it is critical to ask the user what support is required. Since realistically employees may never know which user has a disability, it is important that all employees can model best practices for interacting and communicating with persons with disabilities by proactively identifying and reporting barriers, knowing what to do when someone with a disability encounters a barrier, creating an accessible feedback process, and informing people about the feedback process so that issues can be addressed.

When I worked at the University of Waterloo Libraries, Janet Wason and I developed the following tips for Daily Interactions for our colleagues: "Good customer service in general depends on a "Pact" between the person providing service and the person receiving it. It can be summed up in this way:

P- PAY calm, individual attention to the other person.

A- ASK "How may I help you?" in an effort to find suitable ways to understand and meet each person's learning or service needs; usually, a person is glad to let you know; before ending your interaction, ask, "Does that help with your need?"

C- COMMUNICATE directly, clearly, precisely, and patiently, without interrupting, to ensure shared understanding.

T- TREAT the other person with respect, as a unique individual, with attention to his dignity, independence, sense of integration and equality, and self-sufficiency." (Library Accessibility Services - University of Waterloo Library, 2007)

Meyer, Minnis, and Quilliams (2019) created Accessible Customer Service Practices, which include the following tips for daily interactions:

- "Don't make assumptions about what a person can or cannot do because of their disability. Ask them if and how they'd like you to help.
- Service animals are working—do not distract them.
- When assisting a person who uses a seated mobility device, such as a wheelchair, sit down or back up so you're at eye-level.
- Don't touch or move someone's assistive device or equipment—wheelchair, cane, etc.—without permission. Often people who use these devices view the equipment as an extension of their physical being.
- If a support person is accompanying a user, speak directly to the user rather than the support person. The support person acts as an assistive device.
- When sharing your computer screen to show a user how to do something, ask them if the display is ideal. You could offer to increase or decrease font size or brightness.
- Keep pen and paper in reach and offer them to users if you're having trouble communicating.

- Keep your face visible to users to allow for lip reading.
- When working with someone who has a speech or language impairment, listen patiently. Don't complete their sentences, and ask one question at a time and wait for their reply.
- If someone has trouble hearing you, rephrase rather than repeat your response. Also, ensure that the person can see your face and try deepening the tone of your voice. Raising your voice may not help.
- Keep your language simple: break complex processes into small steps and avoid jargon, slang, idioms, and multi-part directions."

Conclusion

While this article explores practical ways to move towards accessibility, it does not address the largest obstacle of all - ableist attitudes. Ableism is defined as discrimination in favor of those that are able-bodied. It is closely tied with the medical model that sets the disability as a problem to be fixed within an individual in comparison to what is normal. It insidiously absolves the environment and society from fixing barriers that are preventing those with disabilities from having full access to opportunities able-bodied individuals have. When ableism is paired with a lack of empathy, the burden of access is placed squarely on the individual requesting assistance. (Poinke, 2020)

Perhaps most important to libraries making progress on true accessibility is the ability to discern the difference between equality and equity. Equality sees access to resources as the same support for all, whereas equity sees access to resources in line of needs to have successful interactions. In the library profession, there are many stories of Carnegie libraries being made 'accessible' by adding a ramp or an accessible entry around the back to ensure that the facade remains pleasant. While that might provide access that amounts to equal access, it does so at greater cost to someone with a mobility disability by requiring them to travel to the back end of the library, likely by the loading dock and other often unsightly reality of a working building. Equity would seek to create universal access to the front door by adding a ramp that honors the dignity of the people with disability and also supports parents with strollers.

Kumbier and Starkey hope to "expand[...] our shared understanding of access so that it includes a professional ethic of accessibility, justice, and collaboration." (2016, p.4) As libraries explore providing accessible libraries for people with disabilities, we need to consider our role as social institutions in advancing social justice. This will require us to center the needs of all users first by applying the principles of Universal Design and then by creating a simple, easy pathway to accommodations required in order to meet the needs of all library users, honoring their abilities and realities.

References

Australian Library and Information Association. 2019. Guidelines on library and information services for people with disabilities. Accessed online on May 27, 2022 at <https://read.alia.org.au/file/1329/download?token=b5i5eSSM>.

Annie Bélanger. March 2022. Accessibility and Public Services - Part 1: The Case for Access, *International Information & Library Review*, 54:2, 188-194, DOI: 10.1080/10572317.2022.2057768

Amelia Brunskill, Catherine Lantz, and Kavita Mundle. November 2021. What Information Are We Providing to Users with Disabilities? An Analysis of ARL Libraries' Accessibility Webpages. *College & Research Libraries*: 935-958. Accessed online on May 29, 2022

Center for Disease Control and Prevention. 2020. Common Barriers to Participation Experienced by People with Disabilities. <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/disability-barriers.html>

EPIC Assist. 2021. The biggest barrier for people with disability is how society disables them. <https://epicassist.org/the-biggest-barrier-for-people-with-disability/>

Birgitta Irvall, & Gyda Skat Nielsen. 2005. Access to libraries for persons with disabilities - CHECKLIST. International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, IFLA Professional Reports, No. 89. Accessed online on February 26, 2022 at <https://archive.ifla.org/VII/s9/nd1/iflapr-89e.pdf>.

Michelle Kowalsky and John Woodruff. 2017. Creating Inclusive Library Environments: A Planning Guide for Serving Patrons with Disabilities. Chicago: ALA, 2017. 232 p. ISBN: 978-0-8389-1485-4

Alana Kumbier, & Julia Starkey. 2016. Access is not problem solving: disability justice and libraries. *Library Trends*, 64(3).

Kristin Meyer, Samantha Minnis & Kiersten Quilliams. 2019. *Accessible Customer Service Practices*. Accessed online on May 10, 2022 at https://scholarworks.qvsu.edu/library_reports/4.

Centre for Excellence in Universal Design, National Disability Authority. N.d. What is Universal Design. Accessed online on May 10, 2022 at <https://universaldesign.ie/what-is-universal-design/>

National Endowment for the Arts. 2003. Design for Accessibility: A Cultural Administrator's Handbook. Accessed online on May 29, 2022 at <https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/Design-for-Accessibility.pdf>.

Nonprofit Association of Oregon. 2018. Equity & Inclusion Lens Guide. https://nonprofitoregon.org/sites/default/files/uploads/file/NAO-Equity-Lens-Guide-FINAL-ADA_0.pdf

JJ Pionke. Library Employee Views of Disability and Accessibility. *Journal of Library Administration*, 01930826, Feb-Mar2020, Vol. 60, Issue 2.

University of Waterloo Libraries. N.d. Accessibility For Ontarians With Disabilities Act Toolkit.
<https://uwaterloo.ca/library/aoda-toolkit/>

Library Accessibility Services. 2017. Tips for Complying with the AODA Customer Service Standard. University of Waterloo Library. Accessed online on May 29, 2022at
<https://lib.uwaterloo.ca/staff/aoda/AODA-Tips.pdf>.

Brian Wentz, Paul T. Jaeger, & John Carlo Bertot. (2015). *Accessibility for Persons with Disabilities and the Inclusive Future of Libraries: Vol. First edition*. Emerald Group Publishing Limited.