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Library Employee Views of Disability and Accessibility

J. J. Pionke 

Assistant Professor and Applied Health Sciences Librarian, University Library, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Urbana, IL, USA

ABSTRACT

This study sought to explore library employee attitudes toward people with disabilities and accessibility. It also aimed to determine the training needs of current library employees. A survey with both quantitative and qualitative questions was developed and snowball sampling was used. Analysis of both types of data indicates that librarians across library types generally feel unprepared to work with patrons with disabilities. Based on the results, there are several recommendations for improvement within the profession, including creating a more robust training program focused on accessibility and disability, examining policies from local through national levels, and improving recruitment and retention of people with disabilities into the profession.

KEYWORDS

Disability; library employees; accessibility; survey



Introduction

The idea for this research inquiry came from Linda Walling's (2004) article, "Educating Students to Serve Information Seekers with Disabilities." Walling surveyed library graduate school directors and deans to ascertain what library graduate students were learning about disability. Thinking about Walling's research, led to two questions, "how well do working library professionals feel prepared to work with patrons with disabilities?" and "what are the deficits that working library professionals have when it comes to interacting with patrons with disabilities?"

The survey, which included some of the same questions as Walling's, was designed to uncover how comfortable current library professionals feel about doing certain tasks related to assisting people with disabilities and whether or not there were gaps in skills. It was administered across social media and via email invitation to specifically ask current working library professionals to share their experiences of working with patrons with disabilities as well as to reflect on perceived abilities and skills in accessibility.

Literature review

The library literature about disability has been growing but still remains small. Within this literature, the number of articles that focus on library employee attitudes toward

CONTACT J. J. Pionke  pionke@illinois.edu  Assistant Professor and Applied Health Sciences Librarian, Main Library, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1408 W. Gregory, Urbana, IL 61801, USA.

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people with disabilities is limited to only a handful of papers. The most notable of these is Dequin, Schilling, and Huang's (1988) article, "The Attitudes of Academic Librarians Toward Disabled Persons." Utilizing the Attitude Toward Disabled Persons scale, Form O, they received 146 responses to their mailed survey that in part indicated that about 50% of those surveyed had at least a slightly positive attitude toward people with disabilities. The authors also noted that, "While this was encouraging, it also implies that the attitudes of many other academic librarians need to improve" (Dequin, Schilling, & Huang, 1988). The theme of needing improvement was echoed by Brodsky and Wells in their article that examined the attitudes of public library workers in Alabama toward people with disabilities (2011). Brodsky and Wells also found that attitudes by their respondent pool toward people with disabilities were generally favorable (2011).

There is significantly more literature about how library graduate students are being trained to assist patrons with disabilities. The most recent of these articles found that graduate students are not necessarily being adequately prepared to work with patrons with disabilities and that library graduate education needs to focus more on practical application of concepts, empathy building, and inclusivity (Pionke, 2020). Other articles, like Walling's (2004) essay discuss the course offerings of library graduate programs from the point of view of library school administrators. Of this methodology, Gibson was the first to survey library schools to determine what was being taught to library graduate students about people with disabilities (1977). Green and Huprich also based their survey on Walling and also sent their survey to library school administrators to determine what about disability was being taught in the context of web accessibility (2009). Finally, Carlos, in her master's thesis, did an analysis of course catalogs, course descriptions, and syllabi to determine what library graduate students were being taught about disability and accessibility (2005).

Of the literature that examines training about disability and accessibility for people who already are library employees, there are nearly none with the exception of Henczel & O'Brien's (2011) article that discussed the creation of disability awareness training in Australia. Many articles that discuss disability outreach programs do mention training about disability or accessibility topics for library employees, but as the articles are focused on a particular program or outreach event, the article does not interrogate the training that took place. For example, Cahill & Cornish discuss training about assistive technologies in their larger case study about the planning for and creation of a dedicated information and communications technology facility (2003).

Methodology

The survey was developed with the assistance of the Survey Research Lab at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Once developed, the survey was loaded into Qualtrics and distributed over social media and email listservs over a two week period in fall, 2018. Reminders were sent every few days over social media and listservs. Library employee was defined as any person working in a library regardless of rank or degree status. Snowball sampling was used.

There were 219 validated responses to the survey. There were twelve questions of which nine were quantitative and three were qualitative. Questions ranged from asking

what department the respondent works in to their comfort level with various activities related to assisting people with disabilities to respondents preferred modes of professional development delivery (See [the Appendix](#)).

Results

53% of respondents had worked in libraries for less than 10 years. The top two jobs of respondents were subject liaison and administrator. There was a somewhat even distribution across the rest of the departments that respondents worked in, with 19% marking “other”. Of the “other” category, the majority of responses were for children/youth departments ([Figure 1](#)).

90% of respondents indicated that they had assisted people with disabilities while on the job. Several questions revolved around specific tasks or knowledge related to disability and accessibility. The questions were posted in a way to get at how often certain tasks are performed, how comfortable the respondents were performing those tasks, how relevant the tasks are to the job, and how relevant the respondent felt the task would be in the future (five years) to their job. The graphs below highlight the responses to each question.

Respondents were asked about how frequently they performed certain tasks related to accessibility/disability ([Figure 2](#)).

Responses indicated that respondents engaged in activities related to disability/accessibility infrequently (A few times every six months, Once or twice a year, Rarely) for most activities. Most of the responses favored a distribution strongly toward infrequent with the exception of the “empowered decision making” activity which had a much more even distribution of responses. This is surprising because it indicates that many respondents are empowered to make decisions that may treat rules or guidelines

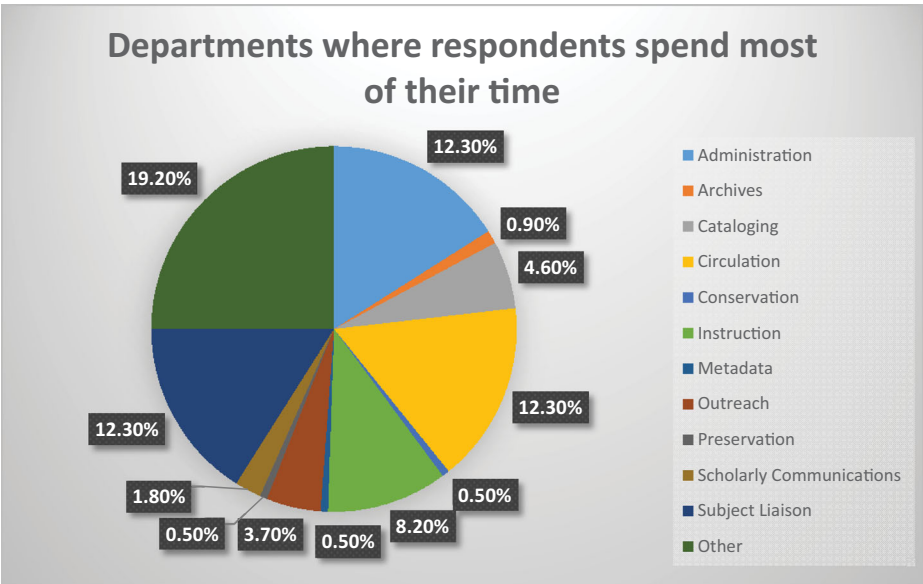


Figure 1. Pie chart of departments that respondents worked in.

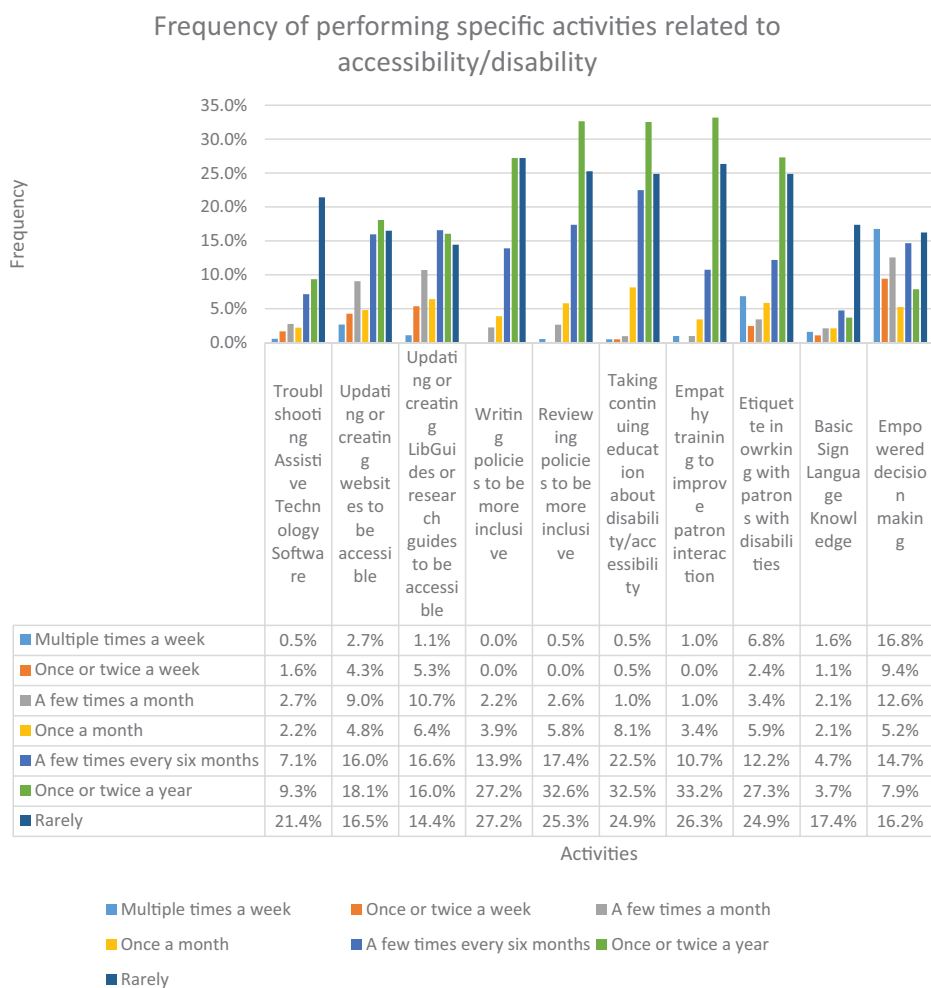


Figure 2. Chart showing how frequently respondents performed certain activities related to accessibility/disability.

flexibly. Respondents were also asked about their comfort level performing the activities in the previous chart (Figure 3).

The greatest level of discomfort was with “troubleshooting assistive technology software” with 63.1% of respondents selecting not at all comfortable or slightly comfortable. Respondents were most comfortable with both “taking continuing education about accessibility/disability topics” and “empowered decision making”. 72.5% of respondents indicated that they were extremely comfortable or very comfortable with “taking continuing education on accessibility/disability topics”. Respondents were asked about the relevance of specific activities related to disability and accessibility to their current positions (Figure 4).

Because frequency and comfort with activities are not necessarily related to relevance of activities to a respondent’s job, the question was asked about the same topics and how relevant they were to the job that the respondent performed. The most relevant activities were “etiquette in working with patrons with disabilities”, followed by



Figure 3. Chart shows the comfort level of respondents performing activities related to accessibility/disability.

“empathy training to improve patron interaction”. “Troubleshooting assistive technology software” and “basic Sign Language knowledge” were listed as the least relevant to respondents current jobs. Respondents were also asked about how relevant they felt the activities related to accessibility/disability would be to their jobs in five years (Figure 5).

“Etiquette in working with patrons with disabilities” and “empowered decision making” were predicted to be the most relevant activities to their jobs in five years. The least relevant activities were “troubleshooting assistive technology software” and “basic Sign Language knowledge”. These results are largely a mirror image of the previous question. 69.91% of respondents marked that they were extremely interested or very interested in training about disability and accessibility. Respondents were asked what training formats they would be interested in utilizing in order to learn more about disability and accessibility (Figure 6).

Respondents were most interested in doing training that involved “online tutorials/seminars/webinars”, followed by a two-way tie between the “one-day workshop” and “print/PDF handouts/guides”.

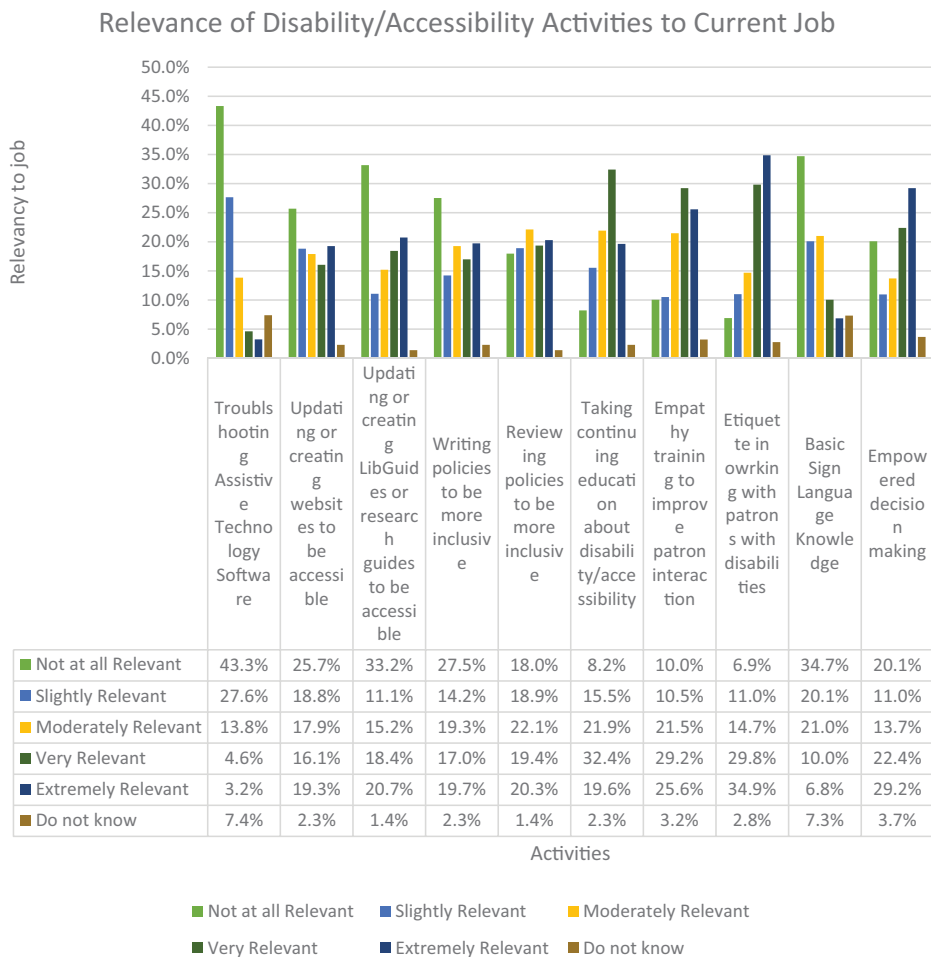


Figure 4. Chart showing relevance of disability/accessibility related activities and current job.

The survey also included three qualitative questions. The analysis below examines themes that emerged from the free text portions of the survey.

Emergent themes from the qualitative portions of the survey

Accessibility

Respondents had a great deal to say about accessibility and for easier understanding, their responses have been grouped into several subthemes. One observation in particular stood out above others in terms of its canny insight into how accessibility is viewed within all levels of education. “I feel like I’ve come from this background of k-12 where there will be students with IEPs in my classes, and I built accessibility in, or a grad school acquaintanceship[sic] that discussed accessibility and universal design a fair bit, and now it’s more ‘We’ll make accommodations [if] we need to.’” This illustrates how accessibility is viewed in different educational spheres. In the K-12 environment, students have comprehensive Individualized Education Programs (IEP) to help them work

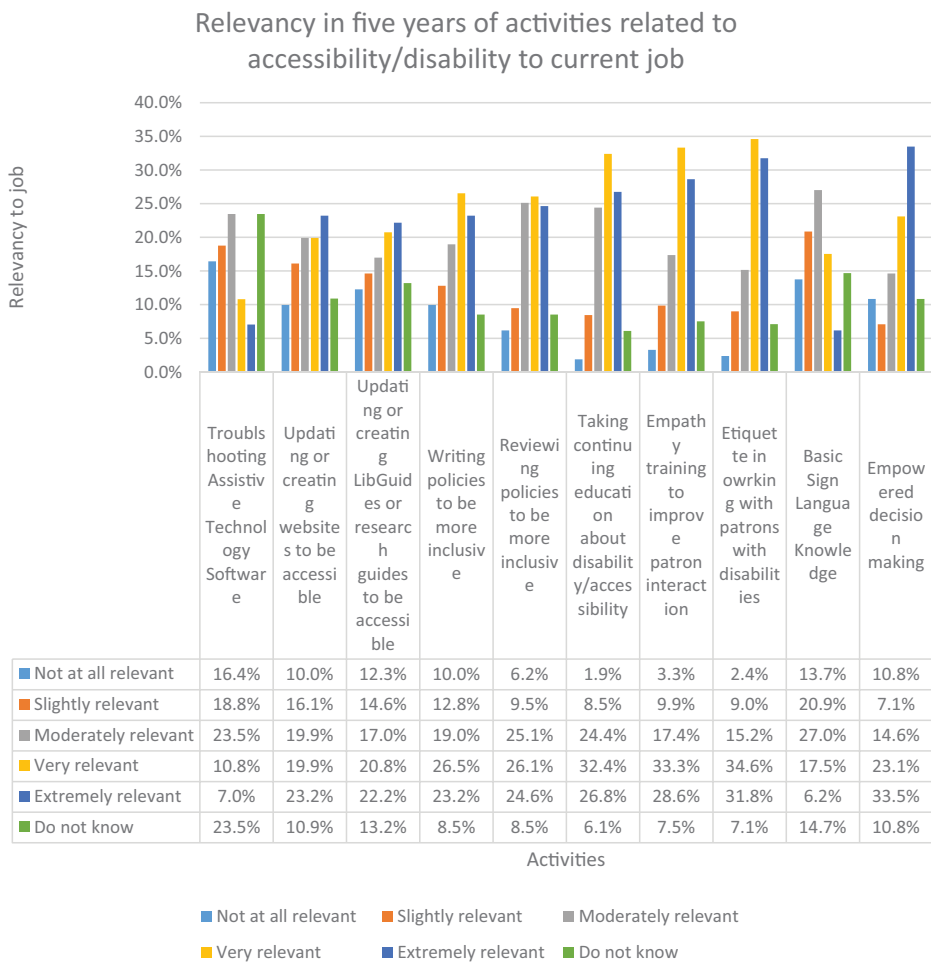


Figure 5. This chart shows how relevant in five years respondents felt that activities related to accessibility/disability would be to their jobs.

with their disabilities. In contrast, higher education focuses on the theory of accessibility through Universal Design, the idea that buildings and services should be created to be accessible to everyone, by only making minimal accommodations that often fall into a very narrow range of services such as, extended time on tests, note takers, and Sign Language interpreters.

The observations of the respondent don't just stop at education however. The last sentence, "We'll make accommodations [if] we need to" can also be applied to libraries, regardless of whether they are connected to an educational institution. This ableist attitude is reflected in every decision that is made that revolves around adding accessibility as an afterthought or not assisting people with disabilities in the ways that they actually need because they might be trying to "game" the system. The subtle forms that ableism takes is an issue that needs to be examined in depth in future research.

Training formats that respondents were interested in using

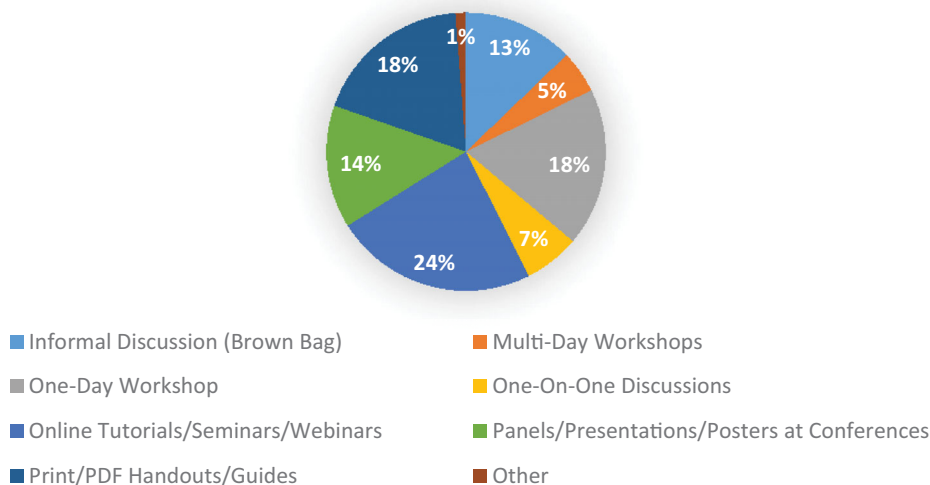


Figure 6. Pie chart of training formats that respondents were interested in using.

Spaces

Respondents had valuable insights about the physical spaces that libraries inhabit, including observations about how they are generally not accessible and how accessibility is not taken into account when thinking about space configurations when renovating. An important aspect of accessibility is how it is communicated to others. For example, many library websites tell readers to ask for assistance at the reference or circulation desk but the kind of assistance that will be offered is rarely illustrated with examples. The result is that often people with disabilities do not ask for assistance when it is available because they aren't aware that they could ask for it. The same holds true to spaces and how they are navigated. For instance, library maps show how space has been allocated but don't always show where doors are located. This can create needless confusion for people when they are trying to find the washroom, and can hear the sound of toilets flushing, but can't find the door to enter the restroom.

Wayfinding signage and accurate maps are only one piece of the accessible navigation puzzle. The other piece is being aware of the need in the first place, especially when circumstances might be subject to change, as with renovations. On respondent observed, "With our library renovations, it might be more difficult for wheelchair users to access parts of the library. No one is mentioning this during renovation updates." The respondent pointed out the need for increased information dissemination during construction, a temporary issue that nonetheless needs keen attention for patrons with disabilities to be able to continue to visit the library.

Other issues of accessible space in the library have to do with physical infrastructure, such as doorway width. A respondent commented, "I had a patron stuck in a doorway where they had to get off their mobility scooter, and I had to physically lift it through the doorway. They found it funny and seemed okay with the situation, but it's

ridiculous that they were in that situation to begin with and if the patron hadn't been able to stand briefly, I don't know what we would have done." While it is unknown the exact width of the doorway mentioned here, most mobility scooters are designed to be able to access spaces with ease. Thus, the doorway itself might not have been compliant with the ADA, which has a more generous width allowance than previous building codes. When planning construction, it is perhaps more important to give extra room beyond the minimum required so that as equipment changes, fewer modifications to the building will be needed.

Accessibility of spaces is not limited to physical disabilities. It also includes sensory and mental disabilities. In particular, patrons with autism might find a library a very overwhelming place because of the noise, people, colors, and light. One respondent mentioned, "I have several children in the 8–10 age range with sensory processing disorders, and the library is overstimulating to them. I wish there was a way to factor in these issues when designing the space."

Being able to adjust spaces easily is important and designing for those adjustments even more so. Design issues also extend to furniture selection. One respondent noted, "Computer and desk height tend to be an issue." Because many librarians tend to make assumptions about accessibility, a library might have twenty standing workstations with one sitting accessible workstation tucked into a corner. While tucking the accessible workstation away in a corner is segregation at worst and ableist at best, the deployment of only one accessible workstation also shows a lack of understanding of the potential range of needs of people with disabilities, which includes people with temporary or permanent back problems, people with attention issues that need to work at a computer for a long time, and people with sight disabilities who need to be able to lean close to the screen or plug in headphones to use a screen reader. Having more accessible workstations that are visible and easy to access is more useful and more equitable to all people, regardless of ability, which is the essence of Universal Design.

Services

Respondents expressed a deep concern with the services and support that they provide to people with disabilities. These issues can be categorized into three broad areas: staffing, education, and being proactive. One respondent stated, "I do not feel that we have enough staff to adequately support students with disabilities." Although the statement shows concern about how to assist students with disabilities, it is unclear, without additional context, how much more staffing would be needed to assist these students. It could be that the respondent is in a single person library or perhaps they are perpetually understaffed so that assisting someone would leave a reference or circulation desk unoccupied. Generally speaking, most people with disabilities tend to need very little help but this is not true in all cases, especially with regard to navigating inaccessible databases. This matches another respondent's comment about etiquette in providing assistance to people with disabilities. "... my main concern is not knowing how helpful to be or how proactive to be with helping. I want to respect autonomy, but I also don't want patrons to feel like they have to wave me down to get help." Here, there is a stated need for more education about disability etiquette as well as a need for more awareness about accessibility more generally. Finally, this quote illustrates the desire to shift from

reactive assistance to proactive assistance. “My main concern is that issues revolving around disabled patrons rarely come up until we find ourselves in a situation where we are unable to provide proper services for a disabled patron. These types of situations could easily be avoided if we were a bit more proactive in preparing our services for disabled patrons.” Libraries are generally more reactionary when it comes to assisting people with disabilities. Libraries often champion being ADA compliant although compliance is only the minimum required by law and doesn’t mean that the library is accessible or welcoming to all. In short, ADA compliance should not be a source of pride for a library but a badge of mediocrity. The above respondent clearly is stating the need for more proactive thinking about how services and spaces are designed so that they are more accessible from the onset rather than being made minimally accessible as an afterthought.

Databases

The issue of database accessibility has been slowly but steadily becoming more important as universities are being litigated against for not having accessible websites as required by the ADA (McKenzie, 2018). This has, in turn, pushed universities, even those not litigated against, to start negotiating for stricter guidelines when purchasing digital content which has encouraged libraries to put pressure on vendors to make their products more accessible. Libraries’ success in this area has been mixed. Libraries are generally willing to help patrons find materials that are accessible and to move quickly in doing so. The same cannot be said of vendors. As explained by one respondent, “Student had very reduced vision and needed digital access to required textbooks. Working with the patron was just fine, but obtaining PDFs of the resources from the different vendors was very time consuming.” It’s not just that there is a significant lag in time in getting accessible materials from vendors, but also that there is active resistance to making materials and platforms accessible. This disinterest on the part of vendors is having a direct impact on libraries because they are starting to make decisions about using vendors in part based on how they are handling accessibility as stated by the following respondent. “The subject librarian ... spoke to the vendor and they seemed disinterested in our concerns. We ended up changing the vendor for the database.” The resistance to accessibility damages librarians trust in vendors which in turn damages the relationship between the two groups. One respondent stated, “Our access to databases is a big concern – I have no faith that EBSCO and other[s] take this part seriously.”

In an effort to encourage vendors to make accessibility a priority, library consortia are starting to utilize their resources to hold vendors accountable. An example is the Big Ten Academic Alliance Library E-Resource Accessibility Taskforce which has been testing vendor platforms for accessibility as well as providing members with boilerplate accessibility language when renegotiating contracts (Introduction, 2019). The taskforce was formed not only to provide resources for libraries so that libraries understand the accessibility of vendor products, but also to encourage conversations and accountability with vendors about accessibility. The sentiment of the taskforce is reflected in a comment by a respondent, “We need to have more conversations with vendors about what we need to be compliant.” This kind of comment drove the Big Ten Academic Alliance to hold a conference in 2019 about accessibility in libraries and invited vendors to

attend as part of the discussion and not just as sponsors (“Library Conference 2019 – Home”, 2019). Still, the concerns of respondents to the survey clearly show that accessibility of electronic materials and platforms is a major issue and one that is only very slowly being addressed.

Instruction

Instruction is something that many librarians participate in, especially in academic and school libraries. Respondents expressed a desire to be inclusive of people in these interactions. One respondent declared, “I also want to be respectful and mindful in my instruction so that students don’t feel left out or condescended to.” However, there was also an acknowledgement that, there can be hidden problems, even when instructors have the best intentions. One respondent related an incident in their instruction session that is illustrative. “I had a student in an instruction session who was overwhelmed by the ‘bad example’ website I showed the class (tons of blinking, pop-up ads) and had trouble calming down and focusing on his research afterwards. I felt bad that I hadn’t thought of that in picking my examples and mad at his professor for not letting me know that might be a problem when I asked about accessibility issues. It made me aware that I wasn’t as thoughtful in planning my instruction as I wanted to be.” While the librarian had good intentions, they asked about students needing accommodation before the session, there was still an incident where a student became overwhelmed with too much stimulation. The librarian definitely could have picked a different example, and probably did in future sessions. More importantly however, is the fact that the professor responsible for the students did not communicate accessibility needs of the student when asked. This could be due to several factors including but not limited to: the professor forgot, the professor didn’t think that they could reveal that information, or the professor didn’t know because the student hadn’t revealed their disability. What this incident reveals is that librarians walk into their instruction sessions having only a basic idea of what they may encounter. More training about disabilities and how they manifest, as well as how to make more accessible choices when creating lesson plans, could help teaching librarians significantly avoid incidents like the one described.

Policies

There was a range of comments about policy and the ability to make changes. The quantitative data shows that respondents feel that in five years “empowered decision making” will be one of the most important skills to have. That was also reflected in the qualitative comments. One respondent’s comment illustrates how policies involving physical objects can be tricky when it comes to people with disabilities, “Patrons with chronic health concerns, such as depression, anxiety, MS [Multiple Sclerosis], fibro, etc. are interesting cases when it comes to physical material. They may be able to mostly borrow and return physical books well enough, but if books are late due to their inability to get out of the house – how to find a balance of forgiveness that’s not TOO forgiving.”

While the respondent focused on forgiveness in terms of fines and due dates, the real issue is the need to review, and possible change, policies related to how and when physical materials are returned. A current example of policy examination and change is from the Champaign Public Library, located in Champaign, Illinois. After a review of their policies, they implemented several changes including the auto-renewal of physical items, with some restrictions such as interlibrary loan, etc. (Keep It Longer, 2019). They also removed most restrictions on the number of materials that could be checked out, instead focusing on making the borrower responsible for their choices. Their policy reads, “We ask our cardholders to set their own reasonable limit, keeping in mind that they are shared resources. Our only limits are on DVDs, Blu-rays, and video games; up to 50 checked out at one time. Remember that you’re responsible for returning everything on time. Please take only as much as you can keep track of” (Checkout and Automatic Renewal, 2019). These policies allow for life to happen to patrons such as poor weather, medical emergencies, forgetfulness, and so on.

Likewise, it was clear that there were times when respondents needed more training in policies and that policies were unnecessarily restrictive. “Directing a patron with a service dog to our disability services liaison re: policies re: the dog needing a vest. He was upset and was citing laws/policy and I didn’t have the knowledge to respond, except to make the referral. I felt sympathetic for him, confused about what I was supposed to do in this situation, and very unhelpful.” The respondent was clearly confused and probably ashamed by their inability to assist the patron because the knowledge they needed about the policy was lacking. Also, the policy itself may have been overly restrictive because a vest is not a required component for service dogs, though they do often wear them.

That is not to say that there weren’t clear instances of library employees having the latitude to make empowered decisions about policies, especially when it was a better outcome to make an exception. A respondent related how they were able to make a policy exception by leaving something outdated in the collection. “A low-income functioning adult now regularly comes into the library and happily heads straight to the VHS tapes I put back into the collection. His need for that tactile comfort from holding the tape, I felt, outweighed the small amount of space his tapes took on the shelf. I’m happy I have the power to make decisions like this.” It is this kind of empowered decision making that allows policies to actually be effective. When they are unilaterally and strictly enforced, it adheres to the myth of average rather than taking into the wide variety of human beings, which creates opportunities for misunderstandings and oppression.

Training

Training in all things accessibility and disability was an area that respondents expressed frustration with because of the complete lack of, or inadequacy of, needed training. One respondent commented, “In general, I don’t feel prepared. I know that our computers have assistive technology/software (Kurzweil), but I don’t know how to help troubleshoot if it doesn’t work. While I’ve only had a few known interactions with patrons with disabilities and I think I handled them okay, I don’t actually have anything to

compare those interactions to in order to determine if they really were okay or successful.” This response shows that not only does the respondent think that they need training, but further that they aren’t sure if their interactions with people with disabilities have been actually useful and respectful to them. This discomfort and confusion was echoed by another respondent, “Because the [hearing impaired] couple returns regularly, I *assume* that we provide them with positive and productive interactions when they visit. [emphasis added]” While one could argue that this discomfort with the ambiguity of an interaction is an assessment issue, the larger concern here is that these respondents are not confident in their abilities to interact with people with disabilities. That discomfort and self-doubt are directly related to a lack of knowledge, which is a training issue.

Of deeper concern is that while respondents are aware of the need for training, administrators may not share that urgency. One respondent observed, “All staff need training in working with people with disabilities, not just librarians and supervisors. We need to create a welcoming, functional, and safe environment for library users with disabilities.” Another respondent stated that training wasn’t a priority for the library’s leadership team. “... any training is sporadic. I am concerned that thorough training would not be a priority to administration.” The lack of priority given to training about accessibility and disability is another example of how people with disabilities are not a patron group that library administrators generally consider. By not making training a priority, it sends a message to library employees that people with disabilities are not a patron population that the library should make an effort to support or even interact with.

Interactions

Some respondents expressed anxiety about interacting with people with disabilities. One respondent confessed, “Keeping up to date on preferred terms, labels, etc. can be hard to keep up with and I sometimes get nervous in interactions around this and also knowing how much to offer help.” This comment focuses on the need to get labels and names “right”. However, people with disabilities have a wide range of what they do and do not want to be called. Thus, it is more important to ask the person about how to refer to them, rather than to make an assumption that one label fits all. For instance, within the Deaf community, which has a rich culture of its own, people who grew up deaf often prefer to be referred to as a Deaf person, rather than a person who is deaf. They put disability first because they consider it a core part of their cultural identity, especially if they were born with deafness and were educated in the Deaf community. However, people who have come to deafness later in life may not see themselves as part of the Deaf community. For them, deafness is not a cultural identity, so the terminology, person who is deaf, maybe more appropriate (Berke, 2019). A library employee would not be aware of which identity a patron who has deafness embraces unless they ask which label to use.

Patron behavior can sometimes be frightening or upsetting. A respondent shared an experience with a patron who was considered to be problematic. “Staff ‘warned’ me about a particular person as he had been known to be aggressive. When I met the patron, I realized that he had multiple disabilities, including deafness and resulting

speech impediment. I listened, and when I either answered incorrectly the question I thought he was asking, or couldn't understand him at all, I would ask him to write down his query. We worked together to find what he wanted ... I never found him to be aggressive, and I believe that his previous behavior was largely a result of frustration." As evidenced from this example, the issue wasn't necessarily with the patron but with how library employees interacted with the patron. The respondent was able to assist the patron and deescalate behavior because the library employee was willing to take the time to meet the patron where they were and not force the patron to interact with the library employee in the manner that made the library employee most comfortable.

Graduate education

Respondents discussed that they felt they hadn't been prepared by their library graduate educations to engage with accessibility and disability issues. One respondent pointed out that the education they received about disability topics was only about what was required by the ADA. "These topics are hardly mentioned in library school – mostly how important it is to have accessibility computer programs and ADA compliance with shelf width."

While understanding the law is certainly important, being accessible and welcoming to people with disabilities is even more imperative. The lack of training about inclusion and accessibility is made all the more distressing by a respondent's comment that their library graduate education taught them to disregard and dismiss people who are different. "... even as early as library school, with hypothetical discussions, the clear consensus was, 'if they seem odd, get rid of them.' This underscores a huge problem within the profession, around issues for what of late is being called 'neurodiversity'." This highlights the troubling lack of education in library graduate education about using empathy and emotional intelligence when interacting with patrons, whether they have disabilities or not. There is starting to be more awareness of this gap in training as evidenced by the recent article in *American Libraries* that focuses on using a trauma informed model when interacting with patrons (Ford, 2019). The trauma informed model doesn't just support library employees to ask what a patron needs but more importantly, encourages library employees to keep in mind what the patron might have experienced and then adjust the librarian's attitudes, language, and body movement accordingly in order to not retraumatize a patron (Ford, 2019, p. 22). This model is rooted in empathy and could help address the apparent deficit in library graduate education around how library employees interact with patrons, especially those that have disabilities.

Library management

Library management is generally seen as a barrier to making library spaces and services accessible. Some barriers are attitudinal, such as resistance to going beyond the ADA required minimum because of a general (dis)belief that ADA compliance means that the building is accessible. One respondent typifies this with their comment, "... library administration does not always understand the scope of disability accommodations, and

seems narrowly focused on meeting the most basic ADA standards related to physical disabilities.” ADA compliance should be a starting point, not the end of the discussion.

More troubling however was library administrations’ attitudes toward people with mental health disabilities. As stated by one respondent, “It doesn’t help that our library director has a tendency not to express much empathy for the less mentally stable library patrons and makes fun of employees who are on antidepressants (did you take your meds today?? in a sarcastic tone).” Another respondent notes that library administration does not expect library employees to treat people with disabilities well, “My only concern is that management sees them [people with disabilities] as a bother and therefore does not send us to any training or expect us to treat them considerately.” These responses indicate that there are much larger issues about attitudes toward people with disabilities than just compliance with the law.

Respondents were also concerned that library management sometimes assumes that there aren’t patrons with disabilities that come to the library. “My major concern is that my library generally assumes that we don’t have any users with disabilities, so it isn’t so interested in planning for them.” All too often, these assumptions do not reflect reality. It’s possible that people with certain disabilities don’t visit the building because it is ADA compliant, but not accessible. If the building was more accessible, people with disabilities would be there. However, it’s also likely that people with disabilities are already in the building but aren’t as conspicuous as library administrators assume. This lack of consideration of a fairly significantly sized portion of the population is further illustrated by several respondents. One revealed, “The door to the handicapped stall in our women’s restroom broke months ago ... Anyone needing to use an accessible stall either has to deal with the non-locking door or ask staff if there’s any other option. I always allow the patron to use the staff restroom which is accessible and private, but other staff do not. We have put in repeated pleas to our maintenance and management teams to fix the situation but so far nothing has happened. It’s despicable.” Another respondent stated, “It seems that whenever we have a specific patron who needs accessibility modification beyond the normal ADA compliance in general, we have to consult and get permission from Library Administration to make the modification which is a needless delay.” Both of these comments show that library administration does not see value in treating people with disabilities well or beyond the minimum required by law.

Finally, there was an acknowledgement by one respondent that while their library administration was trying to do somethings about accessibility, there wasn’t an investment in it. “My concerns are more with having the appropriate resources and support by library administration. They seem to support some of the topics you covered [in the survey] but we’re lacking in training and time to do these things.” Just like developing new programs or creating new spaces, assisting people with disabilities and making programs and spaces accessible takes time and training. By failing to provide it, library administration continues to indicate that people with disabilities aren’t a priority.

Ableist attitudes

Attitudes toward people with disabilities reflected by respondents often revealed a great deal of ableism. Ableism is defined generally as discrimination toward people who are

not able-bodied. Here, able-bodied means not just physical functioning but mental and sensory functioning as well. Ableism takes many forms, from frustration through aggressive behaviors and beyond. A respondent clearly indicated frustrated ableism with their response, “Sometimes disabled persons refuse to interact with us, which is frustrating and a little scary. I’m sorry that I don’t know sign language for deaf patrons, but we can both write or type – why won’t you let me help you in a ‘language’ or method we both understand?” While the respondent is articulating their emotional response, they are putting the burden of communication on the person with a disability and they fail to take into account the possibility that the patron may have had many negative interactions with library staff and others. Libraries often work hard to provide services in the languages of their communities. Sign language is clearly a language being spoken in the community that the respondent is a part of. Taking that into account, as well as the frustrating and scary interactions that the patron has probably had with library employees in the past, it’s unsurprising that the patron is asking to speak in the language that they understand.

Frustration with, and even disbelief in, disability extends well into temporary disabilities such as breaking a limb, or as in this example, pregnancy. “I went and pulled books for a woman who was young but in an advanced state of pregnancy. She told me she was unable to walk any further and our stacks are long and complicated. A coworker complained and said ‘that’s not a service we should provide, especially for someone who is not disabled.’” The coworker’s attitude is ableist because it highlights not only a lack of understanding of the person’s condition, but more importantly a lack of empathy about the condition. The coworker’s attitude also puts the burden of proof of disability on the patron.

Another example of ableism is disbelief that a person has a disability because it cannot be easily seen or understood. A respondent related their experience with a patron and how a colleague responded, “Patron told me she could no longer walk, needed me to bring her a chair immediately. I complied. I know she has Parkinson’s disease. My coworker said ‘oh she just wants attention. She does that all of the time. If she were really sick, she would have a walker or something.’”

Disbelief in disability can be both aggressive and microaggressive and impacts services toward people with disabilities. This kind of disbelief in a person’s disability is often firmly grounded in the medical model of disability, defined as disabilities are conditions that medical science will cure and correct. Seeing disability from the medical model perspective is a known issue in libraries and is reflected in a respondent’s statements about colleagues, “My biggest concern is getting my colleagues on board with the social justice model of disability. They seem stuck on the medical model.” The social model of disability is a way of viewing the world which says that society itself is arranged in a way that is not supportive of people with disabilities and that society must change spaces, attitudes, etc. to be inclusive. Throughout librarianship, there is resistance to the social model of disability and instead a focus on the medical model in large part because the medical model is easier for people to understand. For example, if a patron uses a walker, then building a ramp into the building is the obvious solution. Putting that ramp by the dumpster or in the back of the building doesn’t matter to the medical model because the ramp is there. Putting the ramp in the front of the building

subscribes to the social model of disability in large part because it makes the building more easily accessible for everyone, including people using strollers, temporarily using crutches, or who have other mobility concerns but don't require the use of mobility devices. Having the ramp at the main entrance also creates inclusivity instead of promoting the separate but (not) equal mentality of having to enter a building through the back or by a dumpster.

Respondents showed frustration with the attitudes of colleagues when they interact with people with disabilities. One respondent commented, "...I am not at all reluctant to say outright that I think most library employees at all levels still prefer a rug-sweeping mentality – i.e., get them out and ban them because we don't understand them and they scare us." Libraries are public spaces that should be welcoming to all. However, some library workers have not embraced changes in the way society views diversity and inclusion. Instead of leaning into their discomfort and educating themselves about disabilities and accessibility, they rely on frustration and fear to guide their actions. Sometimes fear and frustration can manifest in subtle ways such as a disbelief that a disability exists because it can't be seen. "I think the biggest struggle is how to work with people who have mental health disabilities since it is very invisible, and the perceived stigma is that they can just make it up (since libraries can't ask for documentation about it) just to get out of certain fines or excuse poor behavior." This reaction is incredibly common and rooted in misunderstanding and misinformation about the nature of disability as well as confusion over the differences between equality and equity. These reactions are perhaps best epitomized by one respondent, who said, "Many of my staff members have outdated ideas about adults and children with mental health issues being 'trouble'." These outdated ideas are harmful for people with disabilities because it perpetuates myths around mental illness, stigmatizes people with disabilities (especially mental health disabilities), and is antithetical to what libraries stand for (access to information for all people).

Empathy

Empathy is closely related to attitudes, discussed above. According Brené Brown, a leading researcher in the area of empathy and vulnerability, "Empathy is about connection..." (2018, p. 149). Connection is about understanding where a person is coming from, as well as being understood by them. Utilizing empathy is a very different model of interaction with patrons than what many librarians are used to or comfortable with because it requires not just understanding the immediate information needs of a patron, but also the full picture of who that patron is and how those information needs intersect with their lives. A clear example of this is in one respondent's comment about working with youth, "...you're often working with an extremely vulnerable population [juveniles] who often don't have the ability to describe their problems effectively. In order to help these kinds of patrons, there needs to be a ton of patience and empathy." Not only do youth often lack the knowledge or vocabulary to articulate their information needs but they are also struggling with emotions, and have difficulty expressing what their problems are. Other factors like race, class, gender, and disability, may also contribute to making interactions challenging. Empathy can be a real doorway into

connecting with hard to reach patrons. However, as stated by another respondent, “While I recognize the need to balance patron and employee safety, I remain despairing of a time when unusual or atypical behaviors can be assessed more equitably, with more empathy.” Empathy isn’t easy to understand or cultivate, especially when a person did not grow up with it. There are currently no training programs that specifically work to build empathy skills in librarianship.

Library employees with disabilities

In the following quote, the respondent makes a general statement about accessibility but more importantly identifies themselves as being a library employee with a disability. “As a person with a slight invisible disability, I worry that we are not doing enough to make our spaces physically usable. We are doing ‘the minimum’ required by law but could be doing so much more.” Their observation is important because they have firsthand experience with the needs of people with disabilities and how libraries fail to meet those needs. That firsthand knowledge of disability is rarely acknowledged in libraries. The most recent demographic survey of the American Library Association (ALA) indicates that only 2.8% of library employees who are ALA members who answered the survey, have a disability (Rosa & Henke, 2018, p. 2). This is significant because the World Health Organization indicates that about 15% of the global population has a disability of some kind (2014). The fact that library employees are not indicating that they have disabilities means that the profession is either excluding people with disabilities from its ranks or that employees with disabilities are afraid of being stigmatized and abused, so they don’t disclose their status.

Only very recently has there been any attention paid to library employees with disabilities. One notable article is Brown & Sheidlower’s survey analysis and follow up interviews with working librarians who have disabilities (2019). Their findings indicate, in part, that the profession has a long way to go in being inclusive, welcoming, and supportive of employees with disabilities. Brown & Sheidlower’s findings are reflected in the words of one respondent who commented about their work situation, “How to deal with ableism from coworkers.” The topic of ableism from coworkers, as well as the accommodation process that library employees have gone through is the subject of Pionke’s recent article, “The impact of disbelief: On being a library employee with a disability” in *Library Trends* (2019). This topic is also covered more theoretically by Moeller, who examines the barriers that library employees with disabilities face through the lens of disability studies (2019).

Discussion

Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative portions of the survey form a snapshot of librarianship that may be hard to accept, especially because results contradict beliefs that are at the heart of librarianship, like equal access for all. Ettarh posits that vocational awe is, in part, a root cause of some of the issues that librarians face in terms of burnout, a lack of diversity, low wages, and low morale (2018). Vocational awe is defined as “... the set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves

and the profession that result in beliefs that libraries as institutions are inherently good and sacred, and therefore beyond critique” (Ettarh, 2018). Vocational awe, stigma, and ableism, prevent libraries from doing better when it comes to some of our most vulnerable patrons. People with disabilities, whose differences are uniquely individual, represent an at times seemingly insurmountable conundrum because there are so many variables to consider when assisting them with their information needs in library spaces. One respondent captured the complex nature of the problem and offered a potential solution, “Disability is not a singular thing; often disabilities are not visible; all interactions need to use disability-inclusive empathy and etiquette to be fully welcoming ... Additionally, library staff also have disabilities.” The respondent is clearly pointing out not only the complexity of disability and that library employees also have disabilities, but more importantly that there are solutions to how to better interact with people with disabilities. To that end, there are three main areas for the profession to explore and develop to create a more inclusive environment for people with disabilities: create a robust training program focused on accessibility, disability, and empathy, examine policies from local through national levels for inclusivity, and improve recruitment and retention of people with disabilities into the profession.

Create a robust training program focused on accessibility, disability, and empathy

While there does exist an excellent and free online training program from Syracuse University called Project ENABLE (Expanding Nondiscriminatory Access By Librarians Everywhere), the program is largely focused on the nuts and bolts of accessibility and disability by delving into, for example, what the ADA says, person first language, and the tenets of universal design (Vision & Goals, 2019). Project ENABLE has been a very successful training program. Between 2012 and 2015, the website had over 1 million visitors (Small, Justus, & Regitano, 2015). Clearly, there is interest in, and a need for, training focused on disability. What is often lacking in education programs like Project ENABLE, and even in graduate school curricula, is an emphasis on developing and nurturing empathy, compassion, mindfulness, and emotional intelligence. There is very limited literature on these topics. In the case of emotional intelligence, the literature largely focuses on emotionally intelligent library leaders (McKeown & Bates, 2013; Martin, 2018; Martin, 2016; Camille & Westbrook, 2013) as well as the relationship between emotional intelligence and student success (Jan & Anwar, 2019; Matteson, 2014; SeyyedHosseini, Khosravi, & BasirianJahromi, 2014). Only one article by Khan, Masrek, & Nadzar specifically discusses an emotional intelligence training needs assessment, but it does not outline how that training should be attempted (2015). While the library literature is lacking in terms of discussing how emotional intelligence and related skills like compassion, empathy, and mindfulness can be used with patrons, other disciplines, especially in the health and medical fields, explore the topic much more extensively because it relates to patient care. For instance, Bamberger et al. conducted a pilot study in which a group of physicians and nurses were given training in emotional intelligence (2017). They tested both the intervention and the control groups using emotional intelligence testing. They also surveyed patients to determine if their experiences of care

were improved. The findings indicated that there was “...a significant increase in patient satisfaction with physicians (although not with nurses) (Bamberger et al., 2017). The authors then discussed potential limiting factors for nurses including different job responsibilities. While the literature on this topic is still relatively small in the health and medical field, it is far more robust than what is in the library literature. The results of training interventions, from a casual perusal of the literature, indicate that there are generally positive outcomes in terms of patient satisfaction. The creation of a training program that builds skills in emotional intelligence, empathy, compassion, and mindfulness for library employees that emphasizes how they interact with patrons could go a long way in creating better experiences for both library employees and for patrons. It could result in diffusing emotionally charged exchanges in a way that leaves both library employees and patrons feeling positive about the interaction.

Examine policies from local through national levels for inclusivity and implement recommendations for diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives

Over the last several years, institutions and associations have started to think more robustly about diversity, equity, and inclusion, which also includes accessibility. For example, the American Library Association (ALA) has not only done the analytical work needed, but also then implemented changes to correct the inequities that they identified during the process. ALA has been doing diversity work since the 1970s, but it is only more recently that the diversity work has moved toward inclusivity of non-ethnic minorities rather than awareness. Case in point, in 2015, the ALA Conference Accessibility Task Force was formed in order to “...researching accessibility at ALA conferences and meetings, and producing a final set of recommendations for facilitating improvements at future meetings” (Final report of ALA’s Conference Accessibility Task Force (CATF), 2017, p. 2). The task force ultimately had 81 recommendations that ALA has been working on implementing in their annual meetings. Other organizations are doing the same. The Medical Library Association created not only a Diversity Task Force but also an Annual Meeting Task Force. Both were specifically comprised of a broad range of diverse individuals, including people with disabilities, in order to better shape the association and the annual meeting to be more equitable, diverse, and inclusive.

Other associations and institutions have also been going through a period of reflection and strategic planning where diversity is a main focus. However, as Jones & Murphy point out, when discussing an example of diversity strategic planning at a university, “It’s exciting that the university has declared diversity as the right thing to do, but now based on this senior leader’s [negative] comments, it’s frustrating and worrisome that it’s just lip service” (2019). Lip service behavior has been observed in many institutions for a wide variety of reasons including, but not limited to resistance to change, organizational culture, and fear. All of these issues create an environment where making changes, especially substantial ones, is difficult. These issues also lead to a great deal of dysfunction in library organizations. Henry, Eschleman, & Moniz wrote an excellent book titled, *The Dysfunctional Library: Challenges and Solutions to Workplace Relationships* (2018). The premise of the book is to discuss the types of dysfunction that

exist in library workplaces and supply potential solutions for those issues. Early in the book, they quote Gabriel who makes a good point in her article about the intersectionality of diversity and organizational culture, “...there need to be some commonly shared values and ideas among colleagues, but there is a difference between a common culture where the majority has a shared set of assumptions and works well together to support and invigorate an institution, and a culture that remains as it is because no one wants to make an effort or, worse, because such efforts are actively or tacitly discouraged” (2010). Gabriel goes on to state, “Honest dialogue about stagnant culture within a library is never easy...” and then she lists several questions and scenarios that might help get the discussion started (2010). While examining institutions and associations for how they navigate issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion is to be applauded, unless the profession is willing to tackle the dysfunctional issues within our organizations and associations, lip service is all that is ever going to be done when addressing diversity issues.

Improve recruitment and retention of people with disabilities into the profession

Representation matters. There has been a realization within the library community that the profession is not representative of the communities that are served. To this end, there has been a lot of ink spilled on discussing recruitment of diverse individuals into the profession as well as the creation of numerous initiatives like ALA’s Spectrum Scholar program. It’s not enough to just recruit diverse individuals into the field of librarianship, the profession also needs to retain them. Jones & Murphy ask a particularly important question about retention, “*What effect will working in my library for any given time have on an individual psychologically, physiologically, and emotionally?*” (2019). They go on to state that retention “...requires an encouraging and supportive environment that is thriving, safe, inclusive, and welcoming and one that inspires positive professional growth and allows staff members to bring their most authentic selves to work. For all intents and purposes, the library should be a place where patrons and staff alike can do their best work” (Jones & Murphy, 2019).

However, retaining diverse individuals is particularly difficult when the profession resists change. In a recent essay, Dr. Nicole Cooke, who is an African American library science professor, paraphrases a white colleague who expressed frustration with her fellow white colleagues, “She said that her colleagues do a great job espousing diversity and inclusion in public, but when it comes time to back up their words with actions, not only do they fail to do so but they also say egregious things to one another in private to justify their inaction. They speak privately to those they perceive to be like-minded to justify their latent (and not always latent) biases and maintain their perceived power and privilege” (2019). Unfortunately, what the white colleague is discussing is mirrored in Cooke’s own experience. In an earlier article, Cooke examined the treatment she has endured in academe, including listing out some of the experiences that she had from her first year on the tenure track which included, “... (from the unsolicited and continued insistence that I am ‘so articulate and well spoken’; to being challenged by white students not used to and uncomfortable with the first African American professor in their academic careers; to calling me by the name of another

African American female; to being subject to a physical attempt at intimidation designed to figuratively put me in my place; to being alluded to as a ‘slack hire’ in a meeting) ...”(2014, p. 40).

Cooke’s example sheds a harsh light on the profession that is also mirrored by a recent article that focuses on a librarian with a disability. The discusses the accommodation process, “In my case, there was absolutely cultural pushback. My recommended accommodation was an enclosed office, but there weren’t any within my department that were available. There were offices on the fourth floor, away from my department, that were empty and had been empty for years, and yet to get one of those offices took nine months and hiring a lawyer. When I finally did get my accommodation, there was an announcement made to my department that disclosed my disability without my consent, an act of aggressive retaliation for seeking out what I needed” (Pionke, 2019, p. 429). Two stories, two different individuals who are diverse for different reasons, and yet both share the experience of being singled out and treated unfairly.

Faced with these narratives, very often spoken of in whisper networks rather than boldly published, it is no wonder that the library and information science profession continues to resist diversity and inclusion. This is further supported by Williams & Hagood who state, “Stretched budgets along with limited training and resources often reveal disconnects between a vision and reality. Diversity in staffing confronts the personal assumptions and biases of individuals, which can impede opportunities for employees with disabilities” (2019, p. 491). Even when funding has been set aside for hiring and retaining diverse individuals, as demonstrated by Cooke above, the presence of a diverse individual does not guarantee inclusion.

While budgets can effect hiring, it is far more likely to be impacted by the history of the profession and institutions and how they address topics like diversity. Barr-Walker & Sharifi, while discussing critical librarianship in health sciences librarianship, point out an important historical note that the Medical Library Association took ten years to debate whether or not to integrate African Americans into the association and that the association did not take a stand against discrimination based on race until 1972 (2019, p. 262). More importantly however, they state that, “Health sciences librarians are now over the age of 50, the majority of people in our profession were alive prior to MLA taking a public stand against racial prejudice, and one-quarter were born well before libraries were legally desegregated” (Barr-Walker & Sharifi, 2019, p. 262). The same can also be said of people with disabilities who were often institutionalized in deplorable conditions through the 1970s and into the 1980s. Diverse individuals, whether they are people with disabilities or people of color continue to face a long road to inclusion. The profession can accelerate the journey down the road by improving unconscious bias training, developing programs that are designed to recruit and retain diverse individuals, and shifting the culture of institutions toward inclusivity. While these tasks may seem Sisyphean, they can be accomplished by being open-minded, embracing change, and showing compassion for ourselves and others.

Limitations

A major limitation of this study was the snowball method of data collection. A more refined approach that specifically delved into the different library categories would reveal more specific trends and better recommendations according to library type. This study is not generalizable in part because of the snowball method of data gathering and also because demographic data was deliberately excluded from the question set to encourage participation. This means that it is impossible to identify attitudinal concerns and training needs by particular demographic areas.

Conclusion

While the findings of this article are not generalizable, the qualitative findings in particular strongly suggest that there is a lot of work to be done within librarianship when it comes to how libraries interact with people with disabilities, how libraries treat colleagues with disabilities, and how libraries develop our spaces and programs to be inclusive. Future research is needed on all of these topics. In addition, development of education programs that train current library employees on how to be more equitable and inclusive in how they interact with patrons and with each other should be a high priority.

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ORCID

J. J. Pionke  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3261-7684>

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Appendix

Survey Questions

- How many years have you worked in libraries?
Less than 1 year, 1–5, 6–10, 11–15, 16–20, 21–25, 26–30, 31–35, 36–40, 41+
- In which of the following departments do you spend most of your time?
Administration, Archives, Cataloging, Circulation, Conservation, Instruction, Metadata, Outreach, Preservation, Reference, Scholarly Communications, Subject Liaison, Other
- In your time as a librarian, have you ever assisted patrons with disabilities? Disability is defined as mental, physical, or sensory impairment to every day living activities.
I have assisted patrons with disabilities, I have NOT assisted patrons with disabilities
- The following activities pertain to accessibility and disability. Please rate how relevant each activity is to your job currently.
Troubleshooting assistive technology software like JAWS, Kurzweil, or ZoomText, Updating or creating websites to be accessible, Updating or creating LibGuides or research guides to be accessible, Writing policies to be more inclusive, Reviewing policies to be more inclusive, Taking continuing education (webinars, seminars, classes, etc.) about accessibility/disability,

Empathy training to improve interactions with patrons, Etiquette in working with patrons with disabilities, Basic sign language knowledge, Empowered decision making (forgiving fines, making exceptions, etc.)

Not at all relevant, Slightly relevant, Moderately relevant, Very relevant, Extremely relevant, Do not know

5. On average, how often do you perform these activities?
 Troubleshooting assistive technology software like JAWS, Kurzweil, or ZoomText, Updating or creating websites to be accessible, Updating or creating LibGuides or research guides to be accessible, Writing policies to be more inclusive, Reviewing policies to be more inclusive, Taking continuing education (webinars, seminars, classes, etc.) about accessibility/disability, Empathy training to improve interactions with patrons, Etiquette in working with patrons with disabilities, Basic sign language knowledge, Empowered decision making (forgiving fines, making exceptions, etc.)
 Multiple times a week, Once or twice a month, A few times a month, Once a month, A few times every six months, Once or twice a year, Rarely, Never
6. The following activities pertain to accessibility and disability. Please rate how relevant you think each activity will be to your job in FIVE YEARS.
 Troubleshooting assistive technology software like JAWS, Kurzweil, or ZoomText, Updating or creating websites to be accessible, Updating or creating LibGuides or research guides to be accessible, Writing policies to be more inclusive, Reviewing policies to be more inclusive, Taking continuing education (webinars, seminars, classes, etc.) about accessibility/disability, Empathy training to improve interactions with patrons, Etiquette in working with patrons with disabilities, Basic sign language knowledge, Empowered decision making (forgiving fines, making exceptions, etc.)
 Not at all relevant, Slightly relevant, Moderately relevant, Very relevant, Extremely relevant, Do not know
7. Please rate how comfortable you feel with each activity about accessibility and disability.
 Troubleshooting assistive technology software like JAWS, Kurzweil, or ZoomText, Updating or creating websites to be accessible, Updating or creating LibGuides or research guides to be accessible, Writing policies to be more inclusive, Reviewing policies to be more inclusive, Taking continuing education (webinars, seminars, classes, etc.) about accessibility/disability, Empathy training to improve interactions with patrons, Etiquette in working with patrons with disabilities, Basic sign language knowledge, Empowered decision making (forgiving fines, making exceptions, etc.)
 Not at all comfortable, Slightly comfortable, Moderately comfortable, Very comfortable, Extremely comfortable, Do not know
8. Based on your experience, please describe any additional concerns you have related to working with patrons with disabilities.
 Free text response
9. Please provide an example of a positive or negative interaction you've had with a patron with a disability
 Free text response
10. How interested would you be in receiving training regarding accessibility and disability?
 Extremely interested, Very interested, Moderately interested, Slightly interested, Not at all interested
11. Which of the following training formats would you be interested in (select all that apply).
 Informal discussions (brown bags), Multi-day workshops, One-day workshops, One-on-one discussions, Online tutorials/seminars/webinars, Panels/presentations/posters at conferences, Print/PDF handouts/guides, Other
12. Please provide any additional comments you may have about accessibility or disability related issues and working with patrons with disabilities.
 Free text response