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Promoting Full Utilization of Library Resources for Students & Patrons with Disabilities

A Conceptual Approach

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Introduction

This exploratory conceptual research highlights federal mandates, policies, and principles that protect the rights of library users with disabilities. According to (ASGCLA, 2019, para. 2), persons with disabilities can be impacted by “economic inequity, illiteracy, cultural isolation, discrimination in education and employment” while participating in various daily activities. In December 2018 it was reported that 40.7 million Americans were living with disabilities (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018, July 26). Given the vast number of Americans with disabilities, library science professionals will appreciate the urgency for maintaining convenient, accessible, and welcoming environments in libraries for persons with disabilities.

The goal of the authors was to present an operating framework for removing barriers, thus promoting inclusions and positive library experiences for this population of users. The literature confirms the important role of legislation and policy in protecting the rights of library users, and how such mandates serve as a platform for current initiatives and strategies. The authors conceptualize how certain dynamics could either promote or impede the use of library services and resources by patrons with disabilities.

Review of the Literature Federal Mandates & Policies

Advocacy and disability awareness initiatives were instrumental in the creation of laws and protections for persons with disabilities in America. The chronology of the disability movement began in 1920 (in response to the ending of World War I and the number of disabled veterans returning from the war). However, initiatives were often inconsistent and opposing until the Disability Rights and Independent Living Movements of the 1970s. The Independent Living Movements represented an expansion of the Disability Rights Movement with emphasis on fully integrating persons with disabilities into their communities. Independent living centers were community-based, private not-for-profit, and controlled by persons with disabilities. The majority of independent living center employees and board members were people with disabilities (Sales, 2014). During the 1970s, persons with disabilities and their advocates began to view disability differently. Disability was viewed less as a medical diagnosis and more as a minority status. This paradigm shift forcefully propelled the

disability rights movement and the passage of key federal legislation.

In 1975, Congress passed the Developmentally Disabled Assistance and Bill of Rights Act. This legislation resulted from revelations of horrific maltreatment of people with developmental disabilities in institutions throughout America. The Disability Rights Center for Protection and Advocacy System of 1977 and the American Association of People with Disabilities of 1980 played vital roles in advocating for protection of rights, equal opportunity, economic power, independent living, and political participation of persons with disabilities, with the latter advocating on an international platform (American Association of People with Disabilities [AAPD], 2018). In the next sections, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and American Library Association policies will identify protections and entitlements for library students and patrons with disabilities. Universal Design principles were also introduced as a basis for inclusiveness and equal access for all.

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 are perhaps the most renowned legislative acts. These acts and their subsequent amendments have paved the way for people with disabilities to be treated with the dignity which is deserving of all citizens (Sales, 2014). These acts provide a stable platform for appropriately meeting the needs of persons with disabilities within academic and public library settings.

Disabilities Legislation

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 has four sections. However, only two are pertinent to the discussion at hand. Section 502 specifies concerns regarding accessibility, particularly architectural barriers. This section established the Architectural and Transportation Compliance Board. Section 504 prohibits the exclusion of a person with a disability from participation in any federal or federally sponsored program or activity, such as attending school (elementary, secondary, post-secondary). This section also addressed the accessibility of buildings in addition to inclusion or participation in programs. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973, rooted in consumer advocacy, influenced its civil rights orientation. Its amendments reflected (as noted

previously) a philosophical shift from viewing disability in the context of the traditional medical model to a more consumer-driven partnership between stakeholders (Sales, 2014). Deficiencies in the legislation were attributed to the lack of an enforcement entity to detect noncompliance with legislative policies. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 served as the foundation for the enactment of the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) prohibits discrimination due to disability in virtually every aspect of society. The act allows persons with disabilities to play more active, visible, and productive roles in society (Brodwin & Orange, 2014). Unlike the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, ADA has governmental mechanisms for enforcement and penalties for noncompliance. ADA comprises five titles. More specific to the discussion at hand are Titles II and III. Title II (Public Service Provision) prohibits discrimination in state and local government programs and activities, such as public housing or use of a library, and requires equal access to services and benefits of public entities, including access to buildings, telephones, and bathrooms where services are provided. Title III (Public Accommodation Provision) prohibits discrimination in public establishments. Both provisions mandate the removal of structural barriers and the institution of reasonable accommodations. Examples of structural accommodations would include lowering of drinking fountains, adding raised letters and Braille markings on elevator controls, and using flashing alarm lights. The 2008 amendments of ADA changed the definition of “disability” to include impairments that substantially limit a major life activity, and specified that assistive devices, auxiliary aids, accommodations, medical therapies and supplies have no bearing in determining whether a disability qualifies under law (Sales, 2014).

American Library Association

The American Library Association (ALA) Library Services for People with Disabilities Policy was designed to support the execution of sections 502 and 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and Titles II and III of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA). The aforementioned legislative acts protect the rights of persons with disabilities in private and public facilities, such as libraries and learning centers. According to the ALA (2019), libraries need to provide sufficient resources and services to all persons to minimize access barriers regardless of their disability. This entails libraries being dedicated to providing equitable resources and services for users with disabilities, and when this is not possible, providing the necessary accommodations (ALA, 2019). Ensuring equal accessibility requires libraries to continuously and objectively examine current resources and services, and to create or implement new policies and procedures if existing policies do not support the equal access to resources and services (ALA, 2019). ALA is cognizant that persons with disabilities are a misrepresented population in various library-related careers (Association of Specialized Government and Cooperative Library Agencies, 2019). An

examination of library resources should consider diversity of personnel; thus, ensuring that librarians and staff with disabilities are visible within the library setting.

Libraries must comply with all applicable accessibility laws, including the standards and requirements of ADA, and state or local disability guidelines (ALA, 2019). ALA discusses other guidelines that can greatly assist libraries with providing and improving accessibility for individuals with disabilities (ALA, 2019). The following guidelines were taken from ALA’s *Services to People with Disabilities: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights* (amended January 29, 2019) and can be used to promote equality of access for persons with disabilities:

- I. “Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves.”
- I. “A person’s right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views.”
- II. “Libraries which make exhibit spaces and meeting rooms available to the public they serve should make such facilities available on an equitable basis.”
- III. All people, regardless of origin, age, background, or views, possess a right to privacy and confidentiality in their library use.

It is very important that librarians, in particular, focus on strategic ways to promote full utilization of library resources by patrons with disabilities. In order to accomplish this goal, they must apply knowledge of policy and legislation in such a manner as to maximize the library experiences of persons with disabilities. The ALA plays a pivotal role in securing the rights and liberties of patrons with disabilities. According to Brodsky and Wells, (2011) research “profession of librarianship has been a proponent of the protection of intellectual freedom with a dedication to equity of access to information” for every patron (p. 9). In institutions of higher education, students with disabilities require orientation to the campus library in collaboration with library personnel and the Office of Disability Services. Such collaboration is necessary in order to promote equal access and full utilization of library resources and services. A similar orientation must occur for patrons with disabilities who use public community libraries.

Universal Design

A popular definition of Universal Design was rendered by Mace in 1985. According to Mace (1985), Universal Design encompasses the design of products, environments, programs, and services to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design. According to guidelines and standards of the American Library Association, Universal Design entails various alternatives for developing “a welcoming and usable environment for all library users regardless of an individual’s age, disability, race, or lack of experience

with utilizing library resources/services” (p. 5). Kowalsky and Woodruff (2017) identified seven principles of Universal Design: “equitable use, flexibility in use, simple/intuitive use, perceptible information, tolerance for error, low physical effort, and size/space for approach and use” (p. 12). According to Spina (2017), these universal design principles are useful and applicable to many library settings. For instance, adjustable tables, chairs, and shelves can provide easier access to computers, books, and other materials for persons using wheelchairs, those with orthopedic conditions, and the elderly. Other applied strategies could involve the integration of symbols alongside text for individuals with visual, attention, and learning disabilities who require access to different websites. Similarly, persons with disabilities whose primary language is not English could benefit from technological advancements or changes related to the usage of symbols along with text while accessing various websites. Libraries which adhere to the inclusive fundamentals of Universal Design guarantee that all users, regardless of ability, enjoy their library experiences (Spina, 2017).

Barriers to Full Utilization of Library Resources & Services

Using legislation and policy as an operating framework, the authors will now reveal specific obstacles and corresponding strategies that can be implemented for patrons with disabilities who utilize library resources and services. The barriers discussed in the succeeding sections are attitudinal/societal, communication, physical/environmental, and technological. These barriers are encountered in both academic and public libraries.

Attitudinal/Societal Barriers & Strategies

When assisting persons with disabilities in academic and public libraries, librarians and library staff should first evaluate and be mindful of personal stereotypes which can discourage or frustrate patrons with disabilities. As reported by Brodsky and Wells (2011), negative attitudes by librarians and staff can make patrons with varied physical, intellectual, or emotional/mental disabilities feel unwelcome. Examples of negative attitudes and behaviors portrayed by library employees are inferiority, pity, ignorance, negative stereotypes, backlash, denial, and fear (National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability [NCWD], 2016, para. 5). Such negative attitudes and behaviors can deter students and patrons from visiting libraries regularly (Fisher & Purcal, 2017). Remy and Seaman (2014) further discussed how societal barriers can easily become obstacles to persons with disabilities.

In a recent study at a major university library, many patrons with disabilities ranging from autism to post traumatic stress disorder expressed frustration when seeking assistance either because librarians or staff did not understand how to provide help, or were impatient with providing the desired help or service (Pionke, 2017). Therefore, communication training and workshops should be implemented to improve attitudes and behaviors towards

persons with disabilities in libraries (Brodsky & Wells, 2011).

Communication Barriers & Strategies

Some academic and public libraries use communication training and workshops as one of the strategies for minimizing negative attitudes and behaviors. Communication through sharing (among library workers with disabilities) is a constructive and conducive way to address misunderstandings or misconceptions pertaining to disability. During communication training and workshops, persons with disabilities are invited to share their experiences in the library and express how a lack of awareness and negative cultural stereotypes of disability can impact them positively or negatively. Addressing patrons’ or students’ concerns or needs instead of focusing on their disability is a functional strategy that can be applied when providing needed assistance (Oud, 2019).

The authors would be amiss in their discussion concerning communication barriers if they did not acknowledge the People First Movement (PFM) that originated in the United States in 1974 at a self-advocacy conference held in Salem, Oregon. The movement was launched on behalf of people with developmental disabilities who were tired of being viewed as a label and defined by their specific disability. This movement emphasized the importance of persons being viewed through the lens of ability vs. disability. The movement brought global attention to the significance of communication and viewing a person with a disability as a person first. Crocker and Smith (2019) highlighted how treatment toward people with disabilities originates with how we speak about them. They also discussed the empowering effects of people-first language and how its use promotes greater equality and social integration by reducing the stigma of disability. Crocker and Smith (2019) also noted how people-first language creates a notable divide between people with disabilities and their diagnosis.

According to Smart and Smart (2018), some persons with disabilities view their “disability as a valued part of their identity”. They “see positive aspects in having the disability” and do not view disability as their “master status” (p. 62). It is important that librarians and staff become competent in the philosophies and guiding principles of people first communication and avoid using disabling language when assisting patrons with disabilities. According to Brodwin & Orange (2014), positive language can facilitate attitudes, behaviors, and interactions, which can promote unbiased actions and remove barriers that limit full participation in society. As stated previously, librarians and staff will greatly benefit from interventions targeting attitudinal and communication biases.

Physical/Environmental Barriers & Strategies

Areas of a library such as the entrance, restrooms, stairways, elevators, ramps, and special media and group rooms should always be accessible to persons with disabilities. Todd (2014) described equipment such as

wheelchairs, walkers, crutches, or canes as being essential for movement in libraries by individuals with physical disabilities. A lack of free movement in and around the library can be a major obstacle for persons using wheelchairs. According to Remy and Seaman (2014), a lack of free movement in and around the library is a major challenge for persons using wheelchairs

Additionally, persons with physical disabilities often require the use of ramps and elevators. Uninstalled or malfunctioning elevators and unavailable or inaccessible ramps can present barriers to library use. Aisles between bookshelves should be adequate in width to eliminate obstruction of movement and maneuvering. Library items such as book carts, step stools, waste baskets and chairs should not block the aisles or seating areas of patrons with disabilities. Another suggestive strategy is for library staff to retrieve books, as needed, from narrow aisles and high shelves, and from floors lacking elevator accessibility (Todd, 2014).

According to a report by the World Health Organization (2011), lack of accessibility will exclude people with disabilities and cause them anxiety because of their dependency on others for daily needs. Eight years later, the World Health Organization (2019) created disability posters to demonstrate the existence of physical or environmental barriers in public settings. For example, the posters depicted how cramped spaces and high sinks and counters can present access barriers in academic or public library settings (Magloff, 2019). Moreover, highly placed elevator buttons and the lack of appropriate signage for locating resources and services can also create access problems for patrons with disabilities (Danso, Owusu-Ansah, & Alorwu, 2012). Physical and environmental barriers can hinder patrons' ability to move freely, safely, and confidently throughout academic and public libraries.

The preceding paragraph addressed physical and environmental barriers within the internal dwelling. However, a number of barriers exist outside of the library building: insufficient parking spaces, distant entrances from the parking lot, ramps without railings, poorly lit access paths to entrances, and unclear or inaccurate signage (Irvall & Nielsen, 2018). Additional external barriers include insufficient space in front of doors or narrow entrances for persons using wheelchairs, and a lack of functioning automatic doors (Danso, Owusu-Ansah, & Alorwu, 2012). In *Library Security and Safety Guide to Prevention, Planning, and Response*, Kahn (2008) recommended the application of strategies such as surveying the exterior grounds of walkways and ramps; checking to make certain that lighting is sufficient in these areas; reviewing emergency evacuation procedures; and conducting routine walk-throughs of the area to comply with accessibility standards of the Americans with Disability Act (ADA). All work stations should have a visible copy of an ADA checklist. This resource will assist library workers in remaining mindful of those physical and environmental barriers that can limit utilization of library resources and diminish the overall library experience for persons with

disabilities. To further promote strategies to greatly reduce or remove physical barriers, a group of researchers from Ghana recommended that Ghana Education Services encourage institutions to provide "courses on universal design in their curriculum" to improve "students' overall knowledge and understanding of accessibility" (Danso, Owusu-Ansah, and Alorwu, 2012, p. 9). The next sections of this manuscript highlight the importance of libraries employing strategies to minimize or eliminate technological barriers in academic and public libraries.

Technological Barriers & Strategies

Technological barriers are those that hinder individuals with disabilities from accessing technology within the library setting. Because technology has enhanced the library usage of persons with disabilities, it is imperative that librarians continue to advocate for appropriate and operable technology. Computers used by those with disabilities are grouped into functional categories, such as computer input and output, and documentation (Burgstahler, 2015). Adaptive or assistive technologies have helped minimize functional tasks for people with disabilities, thereby reducing access barriers. The standard height of computer tables or workstations can represent a technological barrier for persons with mobility impairments. These items should be modified so users can independently access technology and information. In *Library Buildings, Equipment, & the ADA: Compliance Issues and Solutions*, Cirillo and Danford (1996) recommended that librarians and library staff follow the ADA requirements for library seating for people with mobility impairments. This strategy entails providing needed equipment with flexibility and proper positioning of monitors, keyboards, and tabletops (Burgstahler, 2015).

Other technology-related devices and equipment can foster use of library resources or services by individuals with disabilities. As stated by Wray (2013), screen reader software on computers can be used to eliminate or minimize barriers for people with visual, intellectual, or learning disabilities. For instance, screen readers with speech output systems can be placed on computers to convert written text from books or magazines to speech for individuals with learning disabilities (Burgstahler, 2015). According to Mulliken (2019), university employees on campuses "are responsible for ensuring digital accessibility" according to the Office for Civil Rights and the Department of Justice's guidance on disability law (p. 153). Also, academic and public libraries should provide a teletypewriter (TTY) for individuals with hearing impairments in order to facilitate communication between patrons and library staff. Screen-magnifying software on computer monitors should also be available to benefit patrons with low vision (Burke, 2013).

Braille devices such as audiobooks, braille displays, and note-takers should "provide a tactile version of what is on the screens of PCs, laptops, tablets, and smartphones" for individuals who are blind or visually impaired (The National Library Service for the Blind and Physically

Handicapped, 2017, p. 1). Additionally, screen readers are used to address visual challenges or barriers by making elements like navigation, menus, text, fonts, colors, images, and documents accessible on the web (Riley-Huff, 2012). The World Wide Web Consortium accessibility initiative (2012) provides information on Web software which could be very worthwhile to academic and public libraries in their efforts to enhance and improve needed technologies for those with physical, visual, hearing, and learning disabilities or impairments (W3C Web Accessibility Initiative, 2012).

Discussion

The presence of previously noted barriers can limit utilization of library resources, and render negative library experiences for patrons with disabilities. The objective of librarians and staff is to minimize or fully eliminate attitudinal/societal, communication, physical, environmental, and technological barriers encountered by patrons.

Barrier Type	Is the Barrier Absent?	Full Utilization of Library Resources
Attitudinal/Societal	Yes	Yes
Communication	Yes	Yes
Physical	Yes	Yes
Environmental	Yes	Yes
Technological	Yes	Yes

Note. The table depicts how the absence of barriers can promote the utilization of library resources and services and result in a positive library experience for the patrons with disabilities.

The table depicts how the absence of barriers can promote full utilization of library resources and render positive library experiences. Librarians and staff must take active measures to ensure that no attitudinal/societal, communication, physical, environmental, or technological barriers are encountered by patrons.

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, American Library Association policies, and Universal Design principles offer a basis for rights protection and entitlement for persons with disabilities in public facilities such as libraries. It is essential that library workers understand the policy frameworks that shape equal access strategies. The presence or absence of attitudinal/societal, communication, physical/environmental, and technological barriers can significantly impact the library experience of patrons with disabilities. A synthesis of strategies (corresponding to the aforementioned barriers) was introduced in this article. It is imperative that library workers: 1) routinely participate in trainings that afford opportunities to rate their compliance with accessibility legislation and policy; 2) dialogue with users with disabilities, and 3) develop written plans of actions for ensuring equal access throughout the library setting.

The authors are aware of the limits of conceptual research. Henceforth, future research will be qualitative in nature where patrons with disabilities are encouraged to discuss their experiences and ideas about access issues. The authors will also investigate and quantify the prevalence of legal actions pertaining to limited or subpar library access for persons with disabilities. It is the authors' hope that this article facilitates additional dialogue and research on this important and timely topic.

Conclusion

Upon conclusion of the literature review, the authors attempted to conceptualize how patrons with disabilities are affected by barriers within academic and public libraries. This conceptual research extrapolated best practice responses for librarians and staff who assist patrons with disabilities. The article offered a synthesis of strategies for promoting full utilization of library resources for students with disabilities enrolled in universities and for patrons in the general public. After reviewing the literature, it became apparent that federal legislation, Universal Design, and policies from the American Library Association (all) provide a framework for examining and understanding this pertinent topic. Attitudinal/societal, communication, physical, environmental, and technological barriers were identified along with corresponding strategies to minimize barriers for patrons with disabilities utilizing university and public library settings.

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