Academic Librarians with Disabilities: A Literature Review

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As those within higher education work towards providing equity, inclusion, support, and accessibility to those with disabilities who use their services, they also need to look at their internal activities to provide increased support and accessibility to those disabled higher education employees who provide those services. While the topic of minorities within librarianship has seen recent increased attention, librarians with disabilities are often a neglected group and omitted from diversity discussions (Oud, 2019b). According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in the United States, one in four (27%) adults have a disability (CDC, 2023). That means over 61 million experience an impact in their major life activities with mobility being the most common type of disability (CDC, 2019). The most recent American Library Association (ALA) member demographics study was conducted in 2017 and found that 2.9% of the survey respondents self-identified as having a disability (Rosa & Henke, 2017). When contemplating the ALA reporting numbers of members who have a disability against the number of American adults with a disability reported by the CDC, librarianship appears on the surface to have a disproportionate representation in the field with a lack of persons with disabilities. In academic libraries and the library world in general, the focus on disabilities is on those that employees serve and not on those employees who provide services. Published articles and research on library employees with disabilities have been relatively limited until recent years, with a small amount of literature published from 2017 onwards. Before this period, the topic received limited academic and professional attention, despite the growing emphasis on diversity and inclusion in various workplaces, including libraries. Even now, most of the literature on libraries and disabilities focuses on the patrons rather than the staff, with a significant portion of this research centering on public libraries rather than academic libraries. In reviewing the literature, having discussions with colleagues, and considering this author’s own experiences, academic libraries have tended to have a myopic view of how employee services are performed and tend to be grandfathered into how things were always managed in the past. Adoption of new work styles and schedules (hybrid, remote, flexible) in academic libraries is not the norm. Academic librarianship has traditionally been seen as a service role where librarians help library patrons and there have been stand-
ard assumptions on how the work environment is structured and how those services are performed (Oud, 2019b). With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the limitations of library workstyles and schedules were revealed to be mostly based on what were willing to be approved versus what could in reality be possible. Siraki (2021) details her experiences as a disabled library worker and her pandemic experiences of the reversal of the library rule that employees were not allowed to work from home, and how this policy reversal came about not for the needs of the minority of disabled workers but when the majority needed the change because of the pandemic shutdowns.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Disability and Disclosure

In a study of Canadian academic librarians, one of the main issues they faced was found to be a misunderstanding by colleagues and supervisors of the concept of disability which seems to have the underlying assumption that all people are able-bodied, a narrow view and sameness of disabilities, and the dismissal of the actuality of invisible disabilities (Oud, 2019b). Misunderstandings of disabilities were reported in the study to have led to negative judgments and stereotyping of individuals as being unwilling to work, being lazy, wanting unfair advantages or special treatment. Rathburn-Grubb (2021) found in their research that the most common self-coping strategy used by librarians with chronic illnesses is the usage of paid and unpaid leave, which causes job security worries for the librarians about their conditions’ symptoms affecting their ability to be present at work. Workplace structures or assumptions such as a workplace attitude of quick decision-making, pace of work, and high productivity levels can create barriers and difficulties for people with disabilities (Oud, 2019b). One barrier that was reported by academic librarians with disabilities was having to deal with managing their supervisors and colleagues being uncomfortable with their disability, minimizing their disability experiences, discounting the severity of their disability, and the librarians not being taken seriously (Oud, 2019b). Another barrier reported was the decision to disclose their disabilities at work as it evokes feelings of being unsafe, the lack of an inclusive work environment, facing possible stigma, and the fear of their job being impacted. In a quantitative survey and interviews, disabled librarians from many different library types reported that 37.5% felt that their disability challenges were invisible with a little under half of the respondents identifying one of their disabilities as relating to mental health (Brown & Sheidlower, 2019). A study of librarians with chronic illnesses conducted by Rathburn-Grubb (2021) found that psychological conditions were the most reported chronic illness with 42% self-reporting followed by 18% who self-reported an autoimmune disorder condition. Of the librarians with chronic illnesses surveyed, 54% considered themselves a person with a disability, 35% had sought formal work accommodations and of those 79% had their full accommodations approved. In the study, a majority of the respondents on the topic of disclosure described disclosing their conditions or disabilities as a personal decision that is uncomfortable and difficult and opened up the possibility of repercussions, negative reactions, and accusations of special treatment. Frequently library employees have previously experienced discrimination that was illegal because of the Americans with Disabilities Act or have had previous bad experiences that influenced them to not disclose their disabilities (Cook & Clement, 2019). When deciding about disclosing a disability and requesting a needed accommodation, the person with a disability has to weigh the possible instances of harassment, discrimination, and stigma that they might face after disclosing (Pionke, 2019).

ADA and Accommodations

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) is a law that is meant to protect against disability discrimination and ensure equal access to employment for people with disabilities by having provisions about the requesting and granting of accommodations for employees (Americans With Disabilities Act, 1990). In the law, many stipulations are vague and tend to favor the employer by having loosely defined terms such as the job’s “essential functions,” expenses or difficulties that are an “undue hardship,” and accommodations that are considered “reasonable.” This employer counter-offer often shifts to what
the employer is willing to offer and away from what the disabled employee has already determined would meet their needs and what would work best for them, more often than not in collaboration with their medical provider’s guidance and submitted documentation. In the accommodation process, there is often a level of disbelief of the lack of real need held by the employer that the employee with a disability must overcome, especially if the disability is invisible (Pionke, 2019). Oud (2019a) stated, “Though accommodation is meant to level the playing field, it is commonly misunderstood as asking for special treatment, receiving unearned privileges, or gaming the system” (p. 73).

Accommodations in the workplace are supposed to help people with disabilities manage the barriers that they face but misunderstandings continue on the differences between equality and equity. Workplaces tend to focus on treating employees what they consider equally instead of focusing on equity where everyone receives what they need to be successful in their employment. In the study conducted by Oud (2019b) of Canadian academic librarians, this problem of equality vs equity in accommodations was found several times by individuals reporting that requests for accommodations were met with a managerial response that if one employee is allowed a certain request then it would have to be allowed by all employees. Unsurprisingly, Oud (2019b) found that most of the academic librarians with disabilities in their study preferred to not ask for formal disability accommodations and tried to cope and arrange strategies for themselves with the option of asking for legal accommodations being left only if it became necessary. Moeller (2019) notes that librarians will often purchase and provide their own items needed for accommodation as a strategy to avoid the risks of disclosing. A study of academic librarians and archivists with invisible disabilities found that decisions about disclosing tended to be situational and often many reported using selective disclosure and would only disclose some and not all of their disabilities (Manwiller et al., 2023). Oud (2019b) found that participants who did request formal accommodations reported more positive experiences with the process for requests that involved technology or furniture requests. Participants who did request formal accommodations mostly reported negative experiences when requesting formal accommodations that changed working hours, working patterns, or work arrangements and many participants reported the experiences as being stressful and difficult (Oud, 2019b). In their study of disabled librarians, Brown and Sheidlower (2019) had 64.2% of respondents report that they had requested formal legal reasonable accommodations in the workplace or library school with those seeking accommodations because of mobility issues (58.5% of respondents) being the most comfortable with requesting accommodations. Complaints about the accommodation process by librarians are often about the loss of privacy, the lack of policies for the accommodation process, the experience of long wait times during the process, and library administrators not wanting to devote library money to fund accommodation purchases (Rathbun-Grubb, 2021).

Looking internationally, in a study of Irish academic library managers who were surveyed and interviewed about providing accommodations to library employees with disabilities, the results showed a reduced awareness of the needs of employees with nonvisible disabilities and a reluctance to spend more than 10% of the library budget on accommodations and a reluctance to provide flexible working arrangements if there was an impact on other staff or work patterns (O’Neill & Urquhart, 2011). In the study, O’Neill and Urquhart found that only a third of the library managers reported that their colleges had accommodation procedures in place so the weight of the work would fall on the requesting employee with disabilities to try to change accepted practices.

Stigma and Passing

Burns and Green (2019) studied whether academic librarians experienced mental illness stigma that affects their professional work environments. They surveyed 549 academic librarians on whether they had a mental illness diagnosis, of which more than half (311) responded with yes or maybe. Many of those in the study indicated that their work was affected by their mental illness. In the study, 40% of the respondents reported that mental illness had necessitated taking time off from work and 28% reported using paid release time for recovery. Of the academic librarians who reported a mental illness diagnosis,
8% identified their mental illness as a disability. Only a few of the academic librarians disclosed requesting and receiving work accommodations under the Americans with Disabilities Act. Academic librarian respondents replied to questions in the survey regarding burnout that their mental illness is sometimes negatively affected by stressful work environments and reported issues of bullying and lack of support at work. When surveyed about their mental illness, 55% of the academic librarians responded affirmatively that not disclosing their mental illness was because of people's reactions to mental illness, and nearly 60% indicated being scared of people's reactions. According to those surveyed by Burns and Green, 13% of those academic librarians with mental illnesses reported experiencing employer discrimination. The results of participants in the study by Oud (2019b) showed that academic librarians with invisible or mental health disabilities reported experiencing a higher level of stigma and experiences of negative judgments. Employees with invisible disabilities also encounter the complex issue of “passing” as non-disabled until the point when their disability worsens (Brown & Sheidlower, 2019). The physical and mental effort put into “passing” by the person with a disability can itself have a large negative effect on the person and can result in a detriment to the person's work morale, physical, and even overall mental health (Pionke, 2019). In their study of disabled librarians, Brown and Sheidlower (2019) had 64.2% express the experience of being exhausted by the end of their workday and it was reported by many that they work harder and longer to compensate for their disability. The results found by Burns and Green's (2019) survey of academic librarians indicate that there are continuing fears in the academic library profession about stigmatization, disclosure, and discrimination faced by librarians with mental illnesses.

CONCLUSION

Personal Experiences, Future Suggestions, and Continuing Research

This author's experiences as an academic librarian with disabilities have mirrored those issues detailed in the literature. Accommodations that disabled employees had previously needed and were often denied were suddenly freely available during the COVID-19 pandemic shutdowns as most employees switched to remote technology that was already readily available and successful at allowing the workers to complete their job duties. Unfortunately, with the announced end of the pandemic, library employees have seen the old work style rules return to libraries with the continuation of the older less inclusive, and less disability-friendly styles of work once the majority no longer needed to be accommodated. This author's academic library career experiences with the accommodations process have been very humbling, intrusive, stressful, and created feelings of powerlessness. There were many moments of feeling demoralized, with no control over the fate of their continued ability to work, in an unhurried employer accommodation process that seemed to lack any real policies. Disabled employees are not treated as being knowledgeable about their disability, and what the disabled employee and their medical providers might consider a needed reasonable accommodation is often disagreed upon by the employer, and employers are not required to grant the specific accommodation requested as usually, employers will negotiate by providing their own suggested reasonable accommodation offer. After disclosing their conditions and receiving accommodations, this author has often faced microaggressions, discrimination, disbelief, and occasional isolation from other library employees and colleagues throughout their career as an academic librarian. Disability training typically provided to library employees primarily focuses on serving and assisting people with disabilities rather than working or collaborating with them. A great free resource for disability employment issues, information about the Americans with Disabilities Act, and information about job accommodations is the Job Accommodation Network (askjan.org), library managers could incorporate some of their eLearning and training resources, and live or recorded webcast sessions to use for library employee professional development or group training to improve employment disability education and awareness.

The library profession needs to have more research conducted on librarians and library employees with disabilities to fully investigate the issues and solutions and initiate a strong enterprise for
change. More research on academic librarians who are tenure-track faculty and their specific difficulties navigating the tenure process would be a good area for further examination. The American Library Association should conduct an updated demographics study on disability in librarianship. Higher education institutions, academic libraries, and all libraries must urgently address the many different aspects involved in crafting and enacting policies to effectively support employees with disabilities. The institution needs to move beyond just supporting mobility issues and take a hard look at how it can support people with visible and/or invisible disabilities.

Libraries should reevaluate their job descriptions and postings to evaluate them for unnecessary job duties that might limit library employment applications by qualified persons with disabilities (Cook & Clement, 2019). The academic position interview process can be a grueling and daunting experience for anyone but it can be especially so for people with disabilities, and higher education employers need to reconsider the on-campus interview practices of a full-day interview process with presentations and meetings with little to no breaks that are the standard practice in higher education. This full-day schedule might affect the performance or even limit the participation of those with disabilities and it should not force disclosure by the individual to be able to participate in the interview process.

Libraries need to reconsider how their accepted workstyles and working requirements might limit people with disabilities. Some ideas for working with librarians and library employees with disabilities are creating flexibility in the library work policies, evaluating situations individually, and including invisible disabilities in disability training (Cook & Clement, 2019). Manwiller and Pionke (2022) suggest administrators make flexible policies the standard, ensure that all DEI policies include disability, and schedule routine disability inclusion offerings in their training practices. Discussions and trainings should be held regularly about how ableism and disability microaggressions can be harmful to persons with disabilities and create a hostile work environment. To address stigma, there is a profession-wide need for more internally focused training and initiatives for inclusion and advocacy so academic libraries can be a safe place for all (Burns & Green, 2019).

Libraries must have clear and transparent policies, procedures, and timelines for requesting and receiving ADA accommodations. All library managers and supervisors should receive ADA training and be aware of how to support their employees with any issues or requests they might make of their employer and start with a basic level of trust that their employee knows what they need for success. The library world’s treatment of their employees with disabilities is not going to improve without a drive from within and the recognition by all that they can and need to actively do better.

REFERENCES
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