



Flyer 243

Service to Users with Disabilities
Transforming Libraries 8 April 1999

INTRODUCTION

Transforming Libraries no. 8, *Issues and Innovations in Service to Users with Disabilities*, examines how libraries are attempting to meet the needs of users with disabilities, how new assistive and adaptive technologies are being deployed, and what major issues libraries face in providing services to an increasingly broader range of diverse clients. While the focus of this report is on the service to a specific user population, the lessons learned can be applied to any user group.

Today's disabled user may have an obvious physical disability (e.g., necessitating a wheelchair) or a learning disability that is not easily discernible. A major challenge in providing service to these users is to first encourage the users to identify themselves and their needs. The task for libraries (and their parent organizations) is to provide an environment in which the users can safely request and receive services without prejudice.

FACILITIES AND TECHNOLOGIES

Information about assistive technologies is readily available, and libraries often provide lists on their websites. Placement of equipment varies, depending on whether the philosophy of service is to integrate users with regular operations or provide special services through defined programs and offices. Physical accessibility is usually the responsibility of the physical plant services or architecture and construction planning, and new facilities have fewer problems than older, often landmark, buildings. Balancing ADA requirements with fire marshall requirements is one of the more difficult tasks.

STAFFING

None of those interviewed felt they were fully staffed to provide the level of support needed by

their disabled user population. Most individuals with service responsibilities had other library duties as well. Staff training was identified as one of the weakest links in the chain of service. Not only do staff need training in the use of equipment, but more importantly, staff need to learn to be more sensitive and aware in recognizing and working with people with disabilities. Several of the individuals interviewed for this report noted that an appropriate attitude is the most important aspect of good service to users with disabilities.

THE USER VIEW

A special section of this report includes the views of students with disabilities and two graduate students in particular who shared their stories about the difficulties they encountered in conducting library research as a person with a disability.

REPORTS FROM THE FIELD

The Reports from the Field section highlights activities at 13 university libraries, which have developed strategies—from wholly distinct to fully integrated operations—that try to address disabled user needs:

- San Jose State University has a long history of service to users with disabilities. An extensive program is in place, but, as student needs have changed from primarily physical ones to those including learning disabilities, the complexities of managing a successful program have placed great demands on the organization.
 - New York University encourages an ongoing dialogue among users and those who provide services to them. The NYU liaison noted that services designed for people with disabilities also benefit users who are older or are temporarily disabled.
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- Rutgers University has integrated adaptive technologies in the library and adopted a philosophy to provide users with what they ask for, recognizing that those specific requests are usually reasonable and appropriate.
- Kansas State University considers partnerships with other campus, community, city, and county services critical to their ability to successfully respond to user needs with appropriate technologies.
- The traditionally strong program at the University of California at Berkeley is housed in the Moffitt Library, but managed by the campus Disabled Students Program. Each branch library has a staff contact through which information can be shared.
- Duke University provides a website for users with disabilities that lists contacts in every department and the campus library as well as web resources and a short reading list.
- Communication is key at Iowa State University, and the library liaison there is in contact with a student-run group, People Understanding Disabilities, and the university disability committee. The combination of information-sharing and individual assistance is enhanced by staff who are willing to go the extra mile for their users.
- The current focus at the University of Nevada–Las Vegas is the newly completed library building with equipment that actually belongs to the library rather than being borrowed from the Disability Resources Center. One staff person will be designated expert for a particular piece of equipment, but all staff will have the opportunity to learn about them to both minimize fear and raise the comfort level.
- The University of Michigan’s Adaptive Technology Center is located in the library. It is the result of collaboration between the library and the Office of Services for Students with Disabilities, which provides the staff. While there is no formal liaison between the two, the location and long-time collaboration has made their interactions seamless.
- The University of Washington is currently reviewing its services for users with disabilities. A proactive outreach program called DO-IT (Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking and Technology) provides technical expertise, and the Disabled Student Services program provides needs assessments.
- Since 1992, the Accessibility Centre in the Dana Porter Arts Library at the University of Waterloo has served as the location for concentrated assistance for people with disabilities. Its special feature is a “comfy chair” for use by people with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, MS, arthritis, etc.
- Wichita State University has a sophisticated user population, which knows what they need. Because of their response to requests and the resulting word-of-mouth support, the university has strengthened their ability to provide good service.
- The program at Rice University is in its early stages of development. The program director recommends networking with colleagues and conversing with vendors and dealers as helpful planning activities.

Details about the activities at these institutions, as well as links to products and other online resources, are available on the Transforming Libraries’ accompanying website for this issue at < <http://www.arl.org/transform/disabilities/index.html>>.

This SPEC Kit was written by GraceAnne A. DeCandido, Blue Roses Editorial and Web Consulting, with editorial advice from Julia C. Blixrud, Director of Information Services, Association of Research Libraries.

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