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Reaching out

The Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education librarians take stock of accommodative services

Librarians get passionate about their responsibility to provide equal access to information for all their patrons. Just look at the recent spirited discussion on EASI's Library Accessibility electronic discussion list (maelstrom.stjohns.edu/archives/axslib-l.html) concerning accessibility problems at the 2005 ALA Annual Conference. Or the full registration for all sessions of the "Designing Web sites for academic libraries" Webcast offered by ACRL in July, September, and October 2005, focusing on usability and accessibility in Web design. But before this, in March 2005, 19 librarians and library assistants from 11 Pennsylvania state universities gathered in Harrisburg to discuss just this topic. Our goal: to brainstorm how best to serve our patrons with disabilities in the both the physical library and on the Web.

Getting organized

The Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE), composed of 14 universities located throughout the commonwealth, serves more than 106,000 students. Each year, PASSHE librarians convene for an annual conference to share information and network. This year, representatives from 11 of the 14 university libraries (one additional library participated through written comments only) met in a roundtable fashion to discuss accommodative services. Attendees ranged from library directors to access services librarians to system administrators. Since the universities often act autonomously, this roundtable discussion

served as an opportunity for the librarians to meet, many for the first time, and to take note of how each university fared towards meeting the needs of patrons with disabilities.

The roundtable discussion came about through the efforts of librarians from Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania who were new to their positions. Approached at the reference desk by patrons seeking to use some assistive technology equipment, we experienced some difficulty using the equipment and wanted to improve our own delivery of services to patrons with disabilities. We set out to contact our university's own office of accommodative services as well as to survey our sister PASSHE libraries. We thought we could draw upon the collective experience and wisdom of the group. A written survey was sent to PASSHE librarians, in which we asked about available assistive technology, staff awareness and training, Web page accessibility, types of disabilities encountered, and library relationships with campus offices of accommodative services. The responses to these surveys served as the basis for the roundtable discussion on

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accommodative services held at the annual meeting.

How do you define a disability?

One of the first themes to emerge from the discussion revolved around those whom we intended to serve. One library director took issue with the wording of our survey, in which we consistently asked about the students who came into the library. He mentioned that it was important to talk about serving patrons with disabilities, not just students with disabilities, because we all have community members who use the library as well. He also reflected on the question, "How do you define a disability?" While it may be easier to identify a person with a vision or mobility disability, more and more often the library is being called upon to assist those with mental, emotional, or learning disabilities. Such accommodations then veer away from providing purely physical arrangements—computer workstations or accessible entrances—to providing areas for quiet study, tutoring, or extended test-taking. Librarians therefore need to know the regulations for access to the building and other physical accessibility issues, as well as being aware of campuswide policies for test-taking accommodations and for proctoring exams.

Providing services . . . and support

We noted that many PASSHE libraries provide a distinct room in which assistive technology equipment is housed. Assistive technology can be defined as anything that makes a task easier to perform,¹ and the equipment provided by our libraries included such things as Zoomtext, JAWS, OpenBook, ReadingEdge, a talking calculator, TTY phone, and a scanner that interacts with this equipment.

The question was raised about whether it was segregation to force the patrons who needed to use this equipment into a separate room. One library reported being required to integrate the equipment into the rest of the library, despite complaints of noise from

machines such as a Braille printer. But, as one library director insisted, as long as all patrons are allowed in and are permitted to use the equipment, then having a room designated for this purpose is not segregation. For example, one librarian reported that international students often use the equipment as a way to improve their English. Brightly colored posters on the walls and curtains over internal windows help to draw additional students into these rooms.

On one campus, the office for accommodative services is located in the library. While this arrangement brings more students into the library building, these visits do not necessarily result in the students placing additional demands on library staff. Many of the roundtable participants reported that the students look to their offices of accommodative services rather than to the library for equipment and help. These offices in turn may or may not ask the library to assist the students, depending on the perceived level of receptivity.

One librarian emphasized this point through a story. While preparing for the discussion, he contacted the director of his campus office of accommodative services and received a response of, "Wow! Someone is interested!" He concluded that if such offices perceive a lack of interest, they will not send students to the library. Several librarians reiterated the importance of having one person serving as a bridge to the office of accommodative services. If the staff in these offices know someone in the library is willing to help, then they will refer students to the library.

Again and again throughout the roundtable discussion, the issue was raised of having someone in the library dedicated to helping those with disabilities. Software and an accessible building are good but, ultimately, useless if those who need them fail to come into the building due to ignorance of these accommodations, or even worse—being made to feel uncomfortable.

Several libraries reported having a member of access services in charge of the as-

sistive technology equipment. This person knows what equipment the library provides and how to run the equipment. An evening access supervisor frequently takes over these responsibilities at night. However, it was pointed out that there needs to be a second person with this knowledge, in case of illness or other absences. One library has gone so far as to assign librarian liaisons to different student groups on campus, including those with disabilities. The librarians go out of the library to meet with these groups, and they mount educational displays in the library relating to culturally diverse topics. Having librarian liaisons to student groups demonstrates both to the students and to other offices on campus that the library is dedicated to serving all of its patrons.

Bobby and beyond

In addition to issues of physical accessibility, the roundtable discussion also addressed Web accessibility in the state system libraries. One librarian from Bloomsburg reported that the World Wide Web Consortium estimates that 99 percent of all Web pages contain some invalid HTML code²—which means that 99 percent of Web pages are inaccessible to students who rely on assistive technology due to visual, auditory, or physical disabilities. Many librarians at the discussion responded that considerable time had been spent evaluating, discussing, and determining how their library Web sites could become accessible. Yet, most agreed that their sites were not fully accessible.

Webster's Dictionary defines accessibility as "capable of being reached, being within reach, easy to speak or deal." To apply this definition to Web pages means that pages would be attainable and no barriers would exist to prevent use. For those responsible for library Web pages, becoming accessible means adhering to the provisions set forth by Section 508 of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The act requires "that individuals with disabilities, who are members of the public seeking information or services from a

federal agency, have access to and use of information and data that is comparable to that provided to the public who are not individuals with disabilities" (www.section508.gov).

Several methods of making Web pages accessible were discussed. First, for increased functionality and easier navigation, Web designers can provide a text-only page for the site. This creates extra work for the designers, but the additional effort ensures that those using screen readers can access the page and that the page is ADA-compliant. For those wishing to integrate accessibility standards with a more visually appealing site, one of the easiest methods of doing this is using the alt tag (<alt>) for all images. This tag will allow screen readers to read a description of the image presented on the screen, and one library Webmaster stated it is part of good programming and should be incorporated into a site's HTML.

Of course, librarians also need to be concerned with the accessibility of electronic resources provided through their Web sites, such as commercially available databases. While it was noted that EBSCOhost, which provides the greatest number of databases to PASSHE libraries, does provide text-only versions of its databases, it was also noted that PASSHE's online public access catalog requires some modification for easy use by patrons with visual disabilities. Librarians should include Web accessibility as a criterion when evaluating databases and commercial vendors.

The end of the roundtable discussion allowed for time to give a demonstration of Bobby. Bobby (www.cast.org/bobby) is a Web site that flags areas of a Web page that may need to be changed for greater accessibility. It will highlight such things as missing alt tags. Of course, Bobby is not foolproof. As pointed out, having a text-only page makes the Web page ADA-compliant, but Bobby does not report the presence of a text-only page. While Bobby serves as a great tool for making library

Web pages more accessible, librarians should not rely solely upon this software.

Reaching out

The roundtable discussion raised many issues and questions that could not be answered in one hour. We discussed the copyright implications of making audio recordings of a textbook for an auditory learner, as well as various training workshops that were available on the different campuses. Because of the high number of participants, time was a factor, and the number of discussion topics had to be limited.

Despite the different resources and services provided by the PASSHE libraries, the discussion reaffirmed that access to information, regardless of format, is key for the library. Resources exist for proactive librarians seeking to serve all their patrons, including campus accommodative services offices, the Bobby Web site, and sister institutions. Taking that step to educate ourselves on what is available and to make others aware we are

doing so lets everyone know that, yes, the library is interested in serving them.

Where do we go from here?

The Bloomsburg librarians have recently begun a blog as a way of communicating with their sister school librarians.³ The answers to the written questionnaire and a summary of the roundtable discussion may be found there, as well as a number of posts detailing some useful resources. We hope the blog promotes awareness of accommodative services in libraries beyond the boundaries of PASSHE, particularly for new librarians. We welcome your participation.

Notes

1. Edwin P. Christmann and Roxanne R. Christmann, "Technologies for special needs," *Science Scope*, Vol. 26, no. 6 (March 2003): 50.
2. "My Web site is standard! And yours?" W3C Quality Assurance, accessed July 21, 2005: www.w3.org/QA/2002/04/Web-Quality.
3. The Bloomburg librarians' blog can be found at pa-sshelco-als.blogspot.com/. *W*

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