(Dis)Abled: Transforming Disabling Library Spaces

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In an article describing disability as a cultural phenomenon, McDermott and Varenne warn that "We must not confuse our ignorance of life with a physical difference for an account of that life; nor should we forget that the particulars of our own ignorance are likely a more crucial determinant of the disabilities manifest in some lives than any differences in the physical makeup of the people."[1] This reminder that perceptions play an important role in defining and shaping the lives of people with impairments fits well within a cultural model of disability, which views people with impairments as a unique cultural group that experiences discrimination regularly. In response to this understanding, the University of Utah's J. Willard Marriott Library began developing a presentation series based on a cultural competence model to train employees to better serve patrons with impairments, expanding it to a larger training program designed to encourage cultural competence across the library. In the process, we examined our spaces, layout, outreach, and services. In this paper, we describe how we created and implemented a cultural competence training program, offering strategies and tools that other libraries can use to develop similar programs.

Cultural Competence Models and Program

Higher education and library organizations, such as the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) and the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), have created standards-based models for demonstrating cultural competence.

The ACRL model focuses first on understanding one's own culture, then learning more about other cultures and incorporating that knowledge into an enduring set of organizational values that emphasize continued cultural competence development.[2] The AAC&U's Intercultural Competence and Knowledge standards emphasize a set of skills, behaviors, and attitudes common to culturally competent students and professionals.[3] Both of these models emphasize skill in understanding one's own cultural biases, developing an understanding and appreciation of other cultures, and then continuing to learn and grow. Beyond individual growth, these values are integrated into the highest levels of organizations, prompting the development and growth of culturally competent services, collections, and workforces.

Several information professionals have created their own models for cultural competence or used the ACRL and AAC&U models to create their own cultural competence programs. Patricia Montiel Overall developed a general model of the steps individuals go through as they become culturally competent, defined cultural competence for Library and Information Services professionals, and highlighted the contributions of various disciplines to the development of cultural competence frameworks.[4] Andrade and Rivera used cultural competence models to encourage the creation of a diverse workforce in the University of Arizona libraries.[5] Others have provided valuable reflections about the need to further integrate cultural competence in library settings,[6] and to strengthen cultural compe-

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tence training in LIS curriculum.[7] As we developed our program, we drew from these examples, as well as the AAC&U and ACRL models to inform our work.

Justification for Cultural Competence in Relation to Patrons with Impairments

When we started developing our program, we focused on improving service to patrons with impairments, recognizing that, although we provided tools and service mandated by our service ethic and relevant laws, we rarely considered them as part of a unique culture about which we needed to learn. We learned cultural competence training is especially relevant in working with people with impairments. Some scholars argue that disability is the basis for a unique culture, paving the way for integrating service to patrons with impairments into a broader cultural competence model and training program. Eddey and Robey define culture as "a group and personal identity based on common experience, a shared resilience in coping with a world that may be oppressive, and a unique body of tangible artifacts (e.g., art, music, literature) derived from this shared experience."[8] Despite negotiating differences in the levels of disability, patrons with impairments have some shared experience of discrimination, stigma, and minority status. As Olkin explains "there are many similarities in the minority experience, whether it is based on disability, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation. The essential definition of a minority group is not numbers but the experience of prejudice, stigma, discrimination, and oppression."[9] In addition, patrons with impairments are often routinely disabled by barriers in negotiating and accessing library buildings, spaces, and services (including technology, collections, or other resources).[10] By understanding both the social and physical ways in which patrons with impairments are disabled, we have a perspective to begin reimagining library service.

This model of disability contrasts sharply with the model that sociologists suggest most often defines how people with impairments are treated in service settings. Sociologists define one of the earliest conceptions of disability as a medical model in which impairment, or physical or psychological difference, becomes synonymous with disability. Disability theorists suggest that this model is predicated on the idea that disability is an individual issue or a "personal tragedy where the person with an impairment has a health or social problem that must be prevented, treated, or cured."[11] We see remnants of this model in the way that library patrons with impairments are often referred to as "patrons with disabilities," which locates the source of access or use problems within the patron and narrows the university's mission to one of providing tools to remedy this perceived personal deficit.

Library Service to Patrons with Impairments

Fortunately, however, numerous scholars have chronicled libraries' efforts to better serve patrons with impairments, providing excellent grounding for building a cultural competence model that includes this minority group and offers effective training for improving service. In fact, these efforts are so numerous that a comprehensive literature review of their contributions would be difficult. Instead, we offer some key examples that we used in building our own knowledge for our program. For instance, several authors offer suggestions about how to ensure compliance with ADA requirements, provide service to patrons with a variety of different needs, develop universal design policies that encourage barrier-free spaces, and assess programs efficiently.[12] Others, like Samson, have surveyed libraries about the services they provide to patrons with impairments, codifying best practices that can be integrated into larger cultural competence models.[13] Others offer best practices for interacting with patrons with specific kinds of impairments,[14] ensuring web accessibility,[15] and providing outreach about services.[16] However, few scholars have integrated working with patrons with impairments into a broader cultural competence model.

Our goal at the University of Utah has been to expand our philosophy of service based on a social model of disability, which places the onus on the library and the broader university to make sure our spaces and services are available and accessible to all patrons. In order to do that, we started our program with the goals of looking at our library through the lens of our patrons with impairments in order to understand how we could improve our spaces and services and how we could provide training opportunities that would allow our staff to feel comfortable working with patrons with cultural differences.

The History of the Program

We laid the foundation for such a program in 2004, when the University of Utah began planning a renovation at the Marriott Library. Our main library was

built near the center of the University in the 1960s and echoed the architectural style of brutalism and the space race. The original library was built to be a giant fortress to protect print collections from light, southwestern heat, and fire. At night, the library looked like a giant white spaceship on top of a hill. Typical of rapidly growing universities in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the library nearly doubled in size to accommodate growing collections, computer labs, classrooms, and meeting spaces. Although our renovated spaces met the minimum requirements specified in the Americans with Disabilities Act,[17] we knew that we wanted a more accessible and friendly space for all of our patrons after the renovation.

The segmentation that characterized the old spaces was problematic for the flow of people and materials throughout the building. When we began our renovation, our facilities manager decided that we would check for ease of movement through spaces by making sure we could move a four-foot wide and eight-foot tall pallet seamlessly throughout the building, a size that also accommodates most wheelchairs. We also removed as many doors as possible, using new technologies and fire suppression systems instead. New double doors, extra wide doors, or doors without mullions (frame inserts) facilitated ease of movement. We focused on implementing four big changes in the new building: creating open space, letting in natural light, improving interior lighting, and standardizing signage for better wayfinding and navigation.

We also used the renovation to build open, inclusive, and accessible spaces for technology use. In the past, patrons with impairments were limited to navigating spaces that were either difficult for a wheelchair or using a retrofitted room that was available by request. This renovation included the move of accessible technology to the newly created Knowledge Commons, which included small group meeting spaces, semi-private spaces, and a much larger group study room. Like many ARL libraries, we had the most common screen readers, scanning systems, speech recognition, accessibility packages, text magnification, and other resources. What we did not have was a model for providing service in a culturally competent manner to patrons with impairments.

Environmental Scan

Although the renovation helped us to remove some of the architectural barriers in the library, we knew—based on patron and employee feedback—that we wanted to focus on improving our service, not just our spaces, for patrons with impairments. Our first step in creating this project was to conduct both formal and informal environmental scans using a variety of assessment tools. The library conducts an in-person biannual print survey, which requests feedback about collections, spaces, and services from users who enter the building. We used the LibQual assessment to get feedback on our space and services. Based on this information, we were able to target areas that needed improvement, creating accessible work spaces, easier access to technology support and team-based reference help.

We were fortunate to have feedback from students with impairments. For instance, students mentioned the need for adjustable height tables in our large group study area and the other floors, as well as easier access to Special Collections, the Fine Arts library, and the oversized book collections. Patrons with impairments wanted accessible microform readers, scanners, and printers, and assistance using bibliographic management software. We sought feedback from staff at the Center for Disability Services (CDS) on campus. They mentioned areas that they felt needed improvement, such as our printing process for patrons with impairments.

During our environmental scan, we also solicited feedback from library employees. Many staff members mentioned that they felt like they were unprepared to use many of the accessible technologies, such as JAWS, a popular screen reading program. Others wanted more opportunities to learn about the tools and services available for students with impairments in locations across campus. As a result, we decided to create a program that would give staff opportunities to further their training and to ask questions about technologies and services available to support patrons with impairments.

Based on these realizations, our next step was to strengthen our relationship with the Center for Disability Services to provide better service for patrons with impairments and get support in recognizing patron needs and implementing changes. Instead of having one library liaison with the CDS, we created a liaison team in consultation with members of the CDS. This interdisciplinary group responds to the needs of patrons with impairments. Our Computing and Media Services staff came to an agreement with the CDS

about how to maintain the accessible room and workstations jointly. We worked with CDS staff to make sure that they were aware of the services we provide and could comfortably refer students to our library. Finally, we met with CDS and Environmental Health and Safety to verify that we had evacuation procedures that accounted for patrons with impairments in the event of an emergency or natural disaster.

Broadening our Program for Cultural Competence

Based on the program that we designed to improve services to patrons with impairments, we expanded the scope of our program, increasing opportunities for training among faculty and staff. For instance, we decided to use time during our employee development week to offer additional training related to cultural competence, including hosting a Safe Zone training[18] specifically for the library and having additional presentations from the Office of Equal Opportunity, Campus Counseling Center, and other campus entities. The Campus Counseling Center offered an excellent presentation about providing public service to patrons with impairments, encouraging us to examine our own cultural experiences and reflect on areas where we, individually, felt like we had experienced discrimination or misunderstanding as a result of a difference of some kind and how we wished the situation had been different. As part of the exercise, the Counseling Center generated a list of different personal traits, such as race, eye color, hair texture and parental status, and asked us to rate whether we felt we were in the minority or majority with regard to our current cultures as we defined them (e.g. at work, in the state, in the country), and how those differences affected our perceptions of how we were treated by others. We were also asked to reflect on ways in which we brought our cultural biases to public service desks and how we could become more conscious of our behavior toward people who were different than us. The program facilitators also asked participants what kinds of situations with patrons they would like help navigating, whether they had questions about culture or cultural competence, and what they would like our cultural competence program to address. We were able to integrate their concerns about interactions such as working with patrons with heavy accents or managing difficult phone conversations into the training. Library staff were also invited to submit any questions or areas they wanted to cover as well.

In addition to having presentations from local organizations, we received funding to bring in DeEtta Jones,[19] a national consultant familiar with libraries, to discuss how we could further build a cultural competence program. She met with staff members during our regular monthly meeting open to all staff members to present about culture, the meaning of cultural competence, and opportunities for each of us to develop cultural competence. She emphasized why cultural competence training benefits staff that do not provide direct public service. She met with members of our Executive Council and cultural competence planning team to help us consider additional strategies like incorporating diversity and inclusion criteria into our organization-wide competencies for library staff, job descriptions, and website. She asked us to consider how cultural competence, diversity, and inclusion are woven into library planning, training, programming, services and assessment.

One of our ideas for future training involves scenario-based learning about diversity and inclusion. We created scenarios like the following for our staff to discuss: "You are answering the phone at a service desk, and a patron calls needing help locating specific resources. You struggle to understand what she is saying because of a strong accent, and ask her to repeat herself. She repeats herself again, and you still misunderstand. You sense that she is becoming frustrated. What do you do next?" We also asked the following scenario "A patron in a wheelchair comes to the service desk. He would like to print several microform documents, but explains that he is paralyzed and has a hard time using the scanner. You want to help but are the only librarian on the desk. What will you do?" Scenario-based training opportunities allow staff to work through potentially difficult situations in a supportive environment where they can think carefully about an appropriate response and also learn from their colleagues about resources they might use in this situation.

During this process, we also had several small presentations about the cultural competence program for different staff groups. In each presentation, we explained the results of our environmental scan and why we thought this program was important, emphasizing it as an opportunity for each of us to develop professionally as well as an opportunity for the library to align itself with university initiatives supporting diversity. We asked division heads and department

managers to emphasize the importance of attending cultural competence programs to their staff, a request that our dean supported. We also made certain that part-time student workers were given time to attend the program sessions. Finally, we sent messages in the days leading up to each event reminding people to attend.

Learning Outcomes

After working with several of our constituents, we developed the following learning outcomes based on both ACRL and AAC&U standards. These standards continue to develop as we refine the scope and nature of the program. At the end of our year of cultural competence training, participants will:

1. Be aware of how cultural and personal values shape interactions;
2. Feel confident about approaching and serving patrons from a variety of cultural backgrounds and demonstrate this confidence by:
   a. Using appropriate verbal cues to begin, maintain, and close interactions;
   b. Using appropriate nonverbal cues to indicate interest and engagement;
3. Be able to provide appropriate referrals and services for patrons from a variety of cultural backgrounds, including the ability to:
   a. Provide culturally appropriate reference service;
   b. Confirm that patron needs have been met;
   c. Use technologies, including software, hardware, peripherals, or assistive devices to provide effective service, enable patrons to meet their goals, and support self-directed learning;
   d. Provide contacts for additional resources to meet patron needs;
4. Understand that cultural competence training and development is a continuous process and:
   a. Engage in learning experiences throughout their careers that allow them to become lifelong learners of cultural competence and to reflect on their own experiences;
   b. Be confident and display behaviors that demonstrate continuous growth and refinement of knowledge, skills, and attitudes related to cultural competence.

In order to ensure these goals are met, we conducted both formal and informal assessment to get a sense of how our employees have responded to the training opportunities. Although we considered creating a grid where participants could mark where they felt in terms of meeting each learning objective, we created an open-ended assessment tool (see Appendix B) that encourages narrative feedback. At the end of the year, we will be doing qualitative analysis using NVivo to assess participant learning. We are working with our Executive Council to get service standards related to cultural competence included in our organization-wide competencies, which specify criteria for evaluating the professional service of our library staff. Based on our work with DeEtta, our Human Resources department also plans to conduct focus groups with students who use the library (see Appendix A).[20] We will ask the focus group to reflect on their perceptions of the library's climate with regard to diversity, and then raise these findings as discussion points with our Executive Council and departmental supervisors.

Creating Similar Programs

Based on our experience, we recommend a variety of tools and strategies that may help other libraries create similar programs. First of all, we recommend conducting an environmental scan that takes into account particular opportunities and challenges unique to your library. For example, interested library staff members need to find out whether or not their organization has policies related to cultural competence. During the first phase of our program, for instance, we looked for documentation describing services to individuals with impairments. Librarians who want to create a similar program should also consider whether there are other staff or faculty members who would be interested in working on the initiative; how that group of interested faculty and staff can solicit feedback from patrons and staff who use the library; and how they can frame the program within their library's mission. The group will need to find out what tools and services are already available, how they are used, and whether or not they need to be upgraded. In addition, investigating resources on campus for individuals with disabilities can help the team find allies and resources across campus. These are only a few of the factors that library staff members interested in implementing a cultural competence program need to consider.

Winning over administration to our plan was also a key factor in our success. To do this, we looked carefully at our organizational mission and framed our objectives in terms of those goals. Our administration concluded that this program would enhance library service and align with university goals. We also worked to find a mix of local resources and allies that we could use, like the Office of Equal Opportunity and the LGBT Resource Center, to keep costs down. This strategy gave our planning team an opportunity to get feedback from these groups about our cultural competence program.

Next, we recommend trying to build stronger relationships with whichever entity on campus works with students with impairments. If they know that library employees are interested in working on issues related to disability, there may be an opportunity to collaborate. At the very least, networking to develop collegial relationships is a great start. For instance, we were able to attend events, such as a scholarship luncheon, that enabled us to get to know staff and students affiliated with the Center for Disability Services. Other organizations, such as an Office of Equal Opportunity or some similar entity on campus, may be able to help with co-sponsoring initiatives and programs and splitting the cost of funding. In our case, we were able to invite staff members from the CDS to demonstrate much of the available technology and train us on some of its uses.

The 21st Century Library

The preface to the 2012 ACRL diversity standards states "if libraries are to continue being indispensable organizations in their campus communities, they must reflect the communities they serve and provide quality services to their increasingly diverse constituencies."[21] Although libraries have come a long way in building spaces, services, and collections that support people from diverse backgrounds, there is still much work to be done. Addressing the needs of patrons with impairments in order to create spaces and services that serve all patrons universally will be a key part of continuing to meet these changing needs. In addition, building strong cultural competence programs that enable libraries to provide employees with continued opportunities to develop culturally competent attitudes and behaviors will be central to serving our diverse constituencies well.

Appendix A. Focus Group Questions Created by DeEtta Jones[22]

1. "Diversity" and "inclusion" can have different meanings and interpretations from different people and that is to be expected. So what does diversity mean to each of you in the environment that you're in?
    a. What does inclusion mean?
2. Given these definitions/characteristics, how would you say the Library is doing in terms of creating a diverse and inclusive environment?
3. What specific examples have you observed or experienced that demonstrate inclusiveness or non-inclusiveness here at the Library?
    a. Maybe some you've heard from others?
    b. Are there examples where you felt you couldn't fully contribute due to a lack of inclusion?
4. Many of the diversity issues we have touched upon have been more general. Now I would like to take the discussion to a more intimate definition to include race, gender, sexual orientation, and religion. How inclusive is the Library as it relates to these differences?
5. Let's specifically discuss gender. How is the Library doing from a gender perspective?
    a. For women, do you feel there are barriers to progressing and achieving your career goals? How so?
    b. For men, what is your perspective regarding how inclusive the library is for men and women?
    c. How about race?
    d. How about from a generational perspective?
6. Are there any other differences people want to discuss in terms of strengths and/or issues/gaps for the Library to address (i.e., religion, work style, sexual orientation, disabilities)?

7. How does or doesn't the Library leadership demonstrate knowledge of and the importance of diversity and inclusion?
8. What could leaders do more of or differently, at all levels, to demonstrate the importance of this ?
9. What would be most meaningful to you, personally, that would demonstrate that the Library appreciates and values diversity? To others you know at the Library?

Appendix B. Presenter Evaluation Form

1. What was the most helpful part of this presentation?

2. What part of this presentation challenged or inspired you the most?

3. What part of this presentation would you change?

Notes

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18. Safe Zone training provides information on cultural competence in serving Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, and Allied students, faculty, and staff.

19. More information about DeEtta Jones' consulting practice is available through her website, http://www.deettajones.com.

20. Since these focus groups are internal quality control, we do not need to go through the Institutional Review Board process.

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