Stephanie Rosen

What does a library accessibility specialist do?

How a new role advances accessibility through education and advocacy

Across North America, academic librarians are quietly converting print materials into accessible files, testing databases for usability, and applying principles of universal design to services, spaces, and instruction. Most of us do this work under unassuming job titles like director of access services or humanities librarian. But a few of us occupy new positions explicitly devoted to library accessibility.

I am the accessibility specialist at the University of Michigan Library, a position created in 2015 under the leadership of Associate University Librarian for Learning and Teaching Laurie Alexander. Alexander understood that because accessibility is always relevant in the academic library, the library should always have someone thinking about accessibility. Now, two years into this position, I have a unique, first-hand perspective on the role of an accessibility specialist in the academic library.

The emergence of library accessibility specialist positions was documented in 2015 by Katya Pereyaslavska,[1] then ARL visiting program officer for accessibility and currently accessibility librarian with Scholars Portal.[2] Today, these positions are still rare. In an informal email survey of U.S. and Canadian library professionals who work on accessibility, only three respondents had *accessibility* in their job titles, and all three had compound titles (e.g., user experience and accessibility librarian).[3]

As one of the few librarians explicitly and expressly devoted to accessibility in college and research libraries, I have had the opportunity to define the role, drawing from my background in teaching, disability studies, and digital scholarship. The way I see it, the work of advancing library accessibility consists of education, strategy, advocacy, and research.

Education is the most important part of this role, because every part has an educational component. When I arrived at Michigan, there was little persuading to do: the library was already committed to accessibility not merely as a matter of compliance, but as a key value affecting every aspect of our mission. Yet there was, and always is, more educating to do, helping each staff member understand:

- How is accessibility part of my job?
- What is disability?
- How can attention to the needs of people with disabilities potentially transform the usability of our resources, the inclusivity of our spaces, the reach of our scholarship, and the equity of our institution?

In every exchange, I aim to get my colleagues asking and answering these questions, activating an accessibility mindset in every corner of our organization. My work also includes more formal educational activities: consultations, workshops, and trainings, drawing on my background as a college instructor. When possible, I use these educational activities to reach the broader profession, giving workshops through ACRL (e.g., a webinar on accessibility and teaching with technology, a conference workshop on captioning), and publishing resources, toolkits, and guides for all.[4]

While education reaches individuals, strategy can change the processes and policies that are greater than any individual or unit. For example,

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we are implementing strategies to deal systematically with video accessibility, to incorporate accessibility into all IT development, and to build accessibility into procurement. While accessibility is a moving target and the library is a changing organization, setting strategy allows us to chart a course amid complexity and to establish systems that can sustain accessibility without repeated interventions.

Our library is part of a larger ecosystem. Advocacy is key to promoting accessibility among partners whose work affects ours: vendors of electronic resources, publishers of content, creators of educational technology. We have a legal obligation to close the gap between inaccessible resources and user needs, but we have an ethical responsibility to improve accessibility in adjacent industries so more resources meet more users' needs.

As part of the Big Ten Academic Alliance, we have been active in the Library E-Resource Accessibility Group, sharing resources and increasing transparency to incentivize vendor accessibility.[5] We have also partnered with individual vendors eager to improve digital accessibility, including the Hypothesis online annotation tool and Chicago Distribution Center's online shopping cart. These partnerships lead to accessible technology in our library and wherever they are used.

Finally, I follow the latest thinking on accessibility from a variety of fields, including technology, disability studies, and law. Research, the counterpart of education, is the other component that touches every aspect of this work. My contributions to research include a recent *In the Library with the Lead Pipe* article illustrating how accessibility can be a tool for library diversity and social justice initiatives.[6] And the recently published online *Describing Visual Resources Toolkit,* developed with funding from the Samuel H. Kress Foundation and input from 30 invited experts, provides guidance to advance accessible publishing in the arts and humanities.[7]

I know from collaborations and conversations with my active network of colleagues that many librarians are thinking about accessibility. Yet in most libraries, these dedicated individuals do accessibility work over and above other full-time obligations. My role as an accessibility specialist is to ensure that my library leads in accessibility,

produces resources to advance the profession, and influences practices in technology, publishing, and scholarship.

Notes

1. Katya Pereyaslavska, "Accessibility Librarian Competencies," ARL Web Accessibility Toolkit, 17 August 2015, http://accessibility.arl.org/2015/08/accessibility-librarian-competencies/.

2. Scholars Portal is a Service of the Ontario Council of University Libraries. Ontario, in particular, and Canada, in general, have a disproportionate presence in library accessibility and a legal commitment to accessibility reflected in progressive laws like the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act.

3. Fifteen library professionals responded to this informal survey sent over the Universal Access Interest Group Mailing List. Respondents with job titles that explicitly include "accessibility" are at Michigan State University, University of Phoenix, and University of Toronto. Many respondents explained that they interpret terms in their job titles or descriptions (e.g., terms such as access and user experience; roles such as, liaison to disability services) to mean accessibility work. Yet many of them do this work in addition to other, more official or explicit duties.

4. Stephanie Rosen, "Accessibility in Teaching with Technology," (webinar, ACRL Instruction Section, May 1, 2017) http://connect.ala.org/node/265679. Breanna Hamm and Stephanie Rosen, "You Can Caption!: A Hands-On Closed Captioning Workshop," (workshop, ACRL 2017 Conference, March 22-25, 2017).

5. Updates from this group, led by Heidi Schroeder, can be found online at "Library E-Resource Accessibility," Big Ten Academic Alliance, accessed November 1, 2017, https://www.btaa.org/library/accessibility/reports.

6. Stephanie Rosen, "Accessibility for Justice: Accessibility as a Tool for Promoting Justice in Librarianship," *In the Library with the Lead Pipe,* November 29, 2017, www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2017/accessibility-for-justice/.

7. "Describing Visual Resources Toolkit," University of Michigan Library, accessed November 1, 2017, https://describingvisualresources.org/. ⌇