

Library Accessibility for Persons with Disabilities and Future Research

Laura Clark Hunt^a, Jennifer Elaine Steele^b, Abigail L. Phillips^c, Amelia Gibson^d

^aThe University of Southern Mississippi, USA

^bLouisiana State University, USA

^cThe University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, USA

^dThe University of Maryland, USA

laura.clarkhunt@usm.edu, jennifersteele@lsu.edu, abileigh@uwm.edu, ameliag@umd.edu

ABSTRACT

According to the CDC (2024), 70 million people in the US have a disability. Mobility impairment is the most common disability, followed by cognition. Mobility disabilities are more common in older adults (CDC, 2024). Cognitive disabilities were most found in young adults. Visually impaired adults had the most restrictive access to healthcare resources. Disability percentages are higher among those who are older, live in poverty, and BIPOC populations. Since the start of the pandemic, Long COVID continues to have a significant impact on those already living with disabilities (CDC, 2024). This leads to the need to discuss how libraries meet the needs of people with disabilities, through the incorporation of universal design, professional development of library workers, and other best practices (Roberson, Barefield, & Griffith, 2022).

Library accessibility has long been a core value for Library and Information Science. The need for diversity, equity, and inclusion has helped equip libraries of all types to increase accessibility through universal design so that all barriers to library access can be eliminated. Technological advancements in assistive technologies such as screen readers have allowed many libraries to reach new patrons regardless. Still, it is only recently that LIS research began incorporating the voices of those who need accessibility resources. By including people with the lived experience of disability in disability and accessibility research, they are empowered to drive conversations and decisions that may improve their quality of life.

Taking a perspective of empowerment theory allows students with disabilities to gain control of their environments, gain access to resources and services, and find relatedness. Supporting and advocating for the disabled community demonstrates how vital their voices are in decision-making and problem-solving. Empowerment theory can guide libraries; this framework is rooted in concepts including power imbalance, community ownership, inclusion, democratic participation, social justice, community knowledge, capacity building, organizational learning, and accountability (Fetterman, Kaftarian, & Wandersman, 2015).

Persons with disabilities face obstacles in their everyday lives. Many must rely on caregivers to help with transportation, medical treatments, and everyday life events that create barriers and continue a history of discrimination. These everyday barriers levied on top of the hurdles required to attend college, buy groceries, or take a shower can be discouraging and daunting to many people with disabilities. There is very little flexibility or extra support for persons with disabilities. Persons with disabilities experience discrimination in areas such as education, employment, medical care, and housing. For those who are disabled and cannot work, federal assistance may be the only way to survive. These obstacles create frustration, discouragement, and hopelessness for many (Irwin, Zhang, Wang, Hein, Wang, Roberts, York, Barner, Bullock Mann, Dilig, & Parker, 2021).

Persons with disabilities experience barriers to accessing and using library resources and services due to issues like maneuverability within the physical and virtual spaces, lack of assistive technology, and inadequate or nonexistent staff support. These individuals experience negative interactions with employers, colleagues, and peers due to stigmas and biases towards their disability/ies. Creating a place with navigable spaces, assistive tools, representation, well-trained and engaged staff, and inclusivity are ways libraries can become more accessible to everyone.

While more tools and access help remove some barriers, libraries must go further and facilitate relational approaches where librarians and staff take on an advocacy role for individuals with disabilities as well as partner with localized disability services in the organization and the community social services to move individuals with disabilities forward toward successful, rewarding, and meaningful experiences and desired outcomes. As libraries make progress in accessibility for those with disability/ies, the issue arises that many do not feel comfortable identifying as disabled. Many individuals have invisible disabilities and do not want to identify or label themselves as “disabled”. Overlooking needs for accessibility in libraries is not acceptable. However, through relationship development and support for self-advocacy, the field of library and information science can foster sustainable options and build lifelong learning opportunities for persons with disabilities.

The panel will explore how MLIS programs and LIS scholarship prepare future library practitioners to provide accessibility in libraries and how research has evolved. This discussion will highlight gaps in pedagogy and research. The panel will address barriers to accessibility, invisible disabilities, and emerging research in LIS focusing on neurodiversity, disability studies, and information work. The panel comprises four faculty members who are educators, practitioners, and researchers specializing in library accessibility for those with disabilities. The panel discussion questions will help inform research and LIS pedagogical teaching practices. Their perspectives and expertise will be present in this discussion, along with the following questions:

1. What are your current research findings telling you?
2. What new assistive technologies have you been teaching in LIS programs?
3. What changes have been being made at Schools of Information Science programs to help prepare students for the current library work environment?
4. What will future research in this area look like?

5. What barriers impact libraries' ability to meet the needs of patrons with disabilities?
6. How have your own experiences with disabilities informed your research and teaching?

Dr. Laura K. Clark Hunt is an Assistant Professor at The University of Southern Mississippi and will serve as a panelist and moderator. She has worked in both public and academic libraries. Her research contributions have focused on program outreach assessment, censorship in public libraries, privacy, persons with disabilities, and accessibility trends in academic libraries.

Dr. Jennifer E. Steele is an Assistant Professor at Louisiana State University and will serve as a panelist for this discussion. She is a former instruction librarian with teaching experience in information literacy instruction. Her research focuses on intellectual freedom, censorship, information access, and accessibility trends in academic libraries.

Dr. Abigail L. Phillips (she/her) is an Associate Professor in the School of Information Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Her research interests include neurodiversity, mental health, disability, trauma-informed care, marginalized communities, and online harassment. She also explores librarianship as a practice and libraries as both institutions and community spaces.

Dr. Amelia Gibson is an Associate Professor at the University of Maryland. Her research interests include information marginalization, trust, and safety online, and in health and learning institutions (libraries and education), with a special focus on maternal health equity and disability justice.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Education programs/schools; Information needs; Information rights; Social justice; Specific populations

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Accessibility; Disabilities; Education programs/schools; Information needs; Neurodiversity

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21900/j.alise.2025.1966>

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