

Beyond ADA: Crossing Borders to Understand the Psychosocial Needs of Students with Disabilities

John Agada and Deborah Dauenheimer

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) established a national mandate for the elimination of discrimination against individuals with disabilities in the U.S. Its provisions direct public and private libraries to provide services to people with disabilities that are equal to services available to people without disabilities. Divided into four parts, the Act seeks to remove discriminatory barriers in employment (Title I), access to services, programs and activities offered by private and public entities (Title II & III), and communication services and auxiliary aids (Title IV). Individuals can bring private lawsuits against libraries that infringe these provisions under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. With one of every four college fresh-person reporting a disability (American Council on Education 2000), the academic library community needs to be prepared to meet their needs. A government study indicated that these students are more likely to be older, less academically prepared, and possessing a lower level of self confidence than the average college fresh-person (Hippolitus 1995).

Since the passing of the ADA, academic library services have been transformed with respect to removal of physical barriers to accessing buildings and resources for students with disabilities (see for examples Carpenter 1996, and McCasland and Golden, 2000). However, relatively little attention has been paid to the less obvious but more insidious barriers posed by negative staff perceptions, attitudes and behaviors towards them. This paper contends that the expectations, hopes and visions embodied in disability rights legislation such as the ADA go beyond compliance with legal statutes. To embrace the spirit of the law, we recommend that academic library staff cross borders to better understand the psychosocial needs of students with disabilities. Scenarios illustrating some non-physical barriers that frustrate information seeking and learning for students with disabilities in academic libraries are described. The paper concludes with recommendations for creating more socially inclusive library service environments.

John Agada is associate professor at the School of Library and Information Management, Emporia State University, Emporia, Kansas, and Deborah Dauenheimer, a recent MLS graduate of Emporia in the Rockies Program is at the Jefferson County Public Library, Wheat Ridge, Colorado, e-mail: ddauen@jefferson.lib.co.us. The authors wish to thank Dawn Howard for contributing some case studies, and Scarlett Fisher-Herriman for assistance with literature searches.

Beyond Compliance: Embracing the Spirit of Disability Rights Legislation

Debates about implementing disability rights legislation revolve around different perspectives about the appropriate definitions of equity on which legal interpretations can be based. Three approaches have been adopted in defining equity: equity as equal treatment, equity as equal access, and equity as equal outcome (Percy 1989). The notions of equal treatment were enshrined in civil rights legislation since the 1960s. Developed within the context of racial discrimination, it required that all persons be evaluated by neutral standards, regardless of personal characteristics. This neutrality principle demands that persons seeking inclusion be "similarly situated" to others, so they can participate in or benefit from public programs without changes to the environment. This traditional concept of equality assumes that differences are irrelevant because, as with racial discrimination, differences may be socially constructed, rather than inherent in people (Minow 1990). Based on this principle, the common catchphrases of equality were developed, such as the "level playing field" (which assumes everyone can run), "equal opportunity" (which assumes everyone can take the test), and, in the context of racial discrimination, "color blind" rules (Rubenstein and Milstein 1993, 3).

What happens when some people cannot run or take the test due to physical and sensory impairment? Such persons may be unable to participate in or benefit from public programs without changes to the environment because they are not "similarly situated". The second equity approach is more appropriate for conceptualizing equity in providing equal access for such people. This approach redefines equality by challenging society's assumptions about the structure of its buildings, social practices, and transportation and communication devices. It suggests that these artifacts and practices are cultural creations whose features have evolved historically in response to the needs of the groups that use them, and to the exclusion of others who have been denied access. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the ADA therefore mandated adaptations to library buildings and resources and the provision of interpreters to offer equal access for students with disabilities. Where exclusion is practiced, the institution, not the person with the disability, must be changed.

Most of the ADA compliance measures focus on provision of equal access, stopping short of ensuring equal outcomes. The notion of equity based on equal outcomes is more far reaching. This approach assumes physical access

as given, while shifting the focus of equity to the impact of services on the well-being of participants. Compensatory treatment is advocated for disadvantaged persons in order for their positions to be equalized with those of other members of society. Equal outcomes in the employment statute, for instance, would entail restructuring and redefining work such that persons with disabilities can derive fulfillment from their jobs. Similarly, this approach challenges academic libraries to offer information counseling services (Agada 1997) to students with disabilities in order to offset any limitations imposed by their impairment.

Current debates on implementing the ADA have however centered on the equal treatment and access approaches. Responsibility for implementation have also been largely defined within institutional, administrative and legislative levels, and hedged with interpretations of what constitutes "reasonable" cost constraints. Scant attention has been paid to the responsibilities of individuals working with or serving people with disabilities, as colleagues or service providers, respectively. The experience of the rehabilitative professions has demonstrated that legal and administrative mandates may foster physical but not social integration of people with disabilities into society. There, social workers have observed that without social integration, de-institutionalized persons have remained enmeshed in a subculture separate from the rest of society, while becoming more exposed to discrimination from the larger society based on social stigma (Stainback, Stainback, and Forrest, 1989). Such findings call attention to the psychosocial factors, which mediate implementation of disability rights laws in higher education.

As the premier resource of academic libraries, the staff ought to take responsibility in embracing the spirit of the ADA by creating a socially inclusive learning environment that is supportive of the needs of students with disabilities. While the construction of ramps, for example, can be mandated by law, issues of whether the staff have the will, compassion and sensitivity to pursue the equal outcomes approach on behalf of students with disabilities, individually and collectively, cannot be fully addressed in the courts of law. As the National Education Association observed with respect to Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973:

The barriers that will be hardest to bring down are those that involve human attitude and bureaucratic inertia. No amount of money is going to cure the human ailments of prejudice against and with-

drawal from those who do not fill some vague standard of normalcy (1978).

This concern was echoed thirteen years later on the prospects of the ADA:

The challenge to be faced [with implementing the ADA] is much deeper than simply legislating discrimination away. We must all look at our prejudices, our own roles in the systematic oppression that disabled people face. Only by rooting our own bias will a future of true equality be possible (Heiman 1991).

Now that the ADA-mandated ramp has “leveled the playing field”, enabling students using wheelchairs to reach the reference desk, how well are academic librarians prepared to remove the psychosocial barriers that frustrate their quest to attain educational outcomes that are equal to those of other students?

Crossing Borders to Remove Psychosocial Barriers

Psychosocial barriers faced by students with disabilities in academic libraries may be traced to the stigma attached to disability in society. According to Goffman, stigmatized persons are seen as “not quite human” and “reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person, to a tainted, discounted one” (1963, 5). Although students with disabilities constitute a heterogeneous group, stigma is readily generalized across disability categories. Thus, a student that has only a physical disability and uses a wheelchair, may be perceived with additional stigmatized labels that occur with other types of disabilities. As a result of such stereotypical assumptions by untrained staff, casual interactions between unfamiliar persons, one with a disability and the other without a disability, may be anxiety-laden, superficial, and marked by a social distance reflecting perceived status and power inequities between the parties. Such interactions are often futile, emotionally frustrating, and challenge the self-esteem and confidence of persons with disabilities. For the other party, such interactions tend to reinforce social stigma and negative attitudes towards persons with disabilities (Makas 1993).

Librarian-patron interactions in academic libraries reflect the traditional asymmetry in perceived power and status relationships between the professional and patron. This difference is greater when the patron has a disability. Since most librarian-patron interactions are also casual and be-

tween unfamiliar persons, they are more likely than not to impact negatively on the self-concept and confidence of the student, thereby undermining her motivations and capacity for learning and information use (Bandura and Schunk 1981, Bruner 1986). Studies which suggest that emotions are implicated in information seeking, and use (Kuhlthau 1994), and evaluation processes (Radford 1996), underscore the significance of librarian attitudes and behaviors in creating conducive learning environments for students with disabilities. The academic library is strategically positioned to foster interactions that empower, rather than demean students with disabilities. Border crossing is suggested as a strategy for reaching out to this population.

Border crossing is a concept from the theory of border pedagogy. According to Henry Giroux, border pedagogy is about the intellectual, emotional and ethical investments we make as part of our attempts to negotiate, accommodate and transform the world in which we find ourselves. The purpose and vision that drives such a pedagogy must be based on a politics and view of authority, that links teaching and learning to forms of self and social empowerment that argue for forms of community life that extends the principles of liberty, equality, justice, and freedom to the widest possible set of institutional and lived relations (Giroux 1992, 81).

By raising questions about the relationships between culture and power, border pedagogy explores the process by which the dominant culture marginalizes the identities and voices of those who by virtue of their disability, class, gender, race, etc., constitute border cultures. Differences between peoples are used to set up borders, which become organizing principles for maintaining “enabling” and “disabling” sets of relations in society.

To foster enabling relations with students, academic librarians need to come to terms with their own prejudice, and move beyond the use of stereotypical knowledge to understand the psychosocial needs of students with disabilities. By listening critically to these students, academic librarians, not only give voice to their true identities (other than those imposed by social stigma), but will also come to understand the limits of their own self knowledge, as well as knowledge of students' conditions, needs and aspirations. Frequent, meaningful interactions would foster positive self-concepts in the students, and positive attitudes in librarians towards them (Lynch and Chosa, 1996). Understanding this population from their own perspectives could also lead to effective advocacy in educating the campus community to remove the barriers reflected in negative perceptions, atti-

tudes and behaviors towards students with disabilities.

The following section describes disabling relations students with disabilities have experienced with staff in academic libraries. An attempt is made to analyze each scenario and recommend appropriate remedies from the perspective of border pedagogy.

Case Studies of Academic Library Experiences by Students with Disabilities

Case Study One: Name Calling

A student using a wheelchair asked for information at the reference desk. The librarian turned to a colleague for assistance, and in their conversation, referred to the student several times as “the crippled student”.

Analysis:

The choice of labels used to describe people and the order in which they are sequenced greatly affects the images that are formed about them and the impressions that result. The deficit model of labeling is one of the mechanisms by which dominant cultures seek to put people “in their place”. Labeling assumes that the condition (e.g. crippled) is synonymous with the person (student), thereby obscuring any other identities the student might have. Such denial of courtesy amounts to *unequal treatment* of the student relative to other students perceived as “normal”, thereby infringing the neutrality principle of equality.

The connotations inspired by such labels are not only derogatory, but also imprecise and erroneous. For example, the negative stereotypes of people with disabilities are historically based on scanty information because people with disabilities had until recently, been segregated from society. Society therefore had little opportunity to know them as persons, and to recognize their abilities. With little access to education, people with disabilities also had limited opportunity to develop to their fullest capacities. These stereotypes therefore developed from many sources, ranging from personal ignorance, fears and anxieties, to inaccurate media and literary portrayals.

The etiology of the words is also reflective of false stereotyping. The adjective “handicap”, for instance, comes from the begging term, “hand-in-cap”. The word, “cripple”, and the verb “to cripple”, also come from “creep”. Even the phrase, “confined to a wheelchair”, inappropriately seeks to conjure up feelings of pity, and helplessness, whereas among those who use wheelchairs, it is considered an extension of the body, and a liberating vehicle enabling independent movement. In these examples, language is used to shape the meaning and impact of a disability on

people’s lives. When the librarian reacts to the student based on stereotypes of “crippled people”; their interactions would be distorted low expectations and social distance between them.

Resolution:

The librarian ought to adopt the people-first language when referring to the student. Strictly speaking, the wheelchair or disability ought to be mentioned only when it helps to illuminate the student’s situation with reference to her information need and requisite service. For instance, if the student was in need of a book on the top shelf, it might be necessary to mention that she uses a wheelchair, and additional assistance might be necessary. Otherwise, she should be identified as a student or library patron, period.

Case Study Two: One Size Fits All

A student with mild cerebral palsy has a hand tremor and tends to write in large letters. The slips of paper provided for filling out requests for library items were too small for her to write legibly on. Her requests for assistance to the staff were met with looks of disbelief and other negative body language. The staff that eventually rendered assistance let out a loud sigh, indicating her exasperation.

Analysis:

In this case, the hand tremor experienced by the student was the impairment but the disability was the nature and structure of library materials, procedures, and staff attitude threatened to deny the student *equal access* to the library resources. Had the library provided bigger-sized forms or other options for requesting items, this problem might have been averted. The situation was however exasperated by the staff attitudes reflecting the belief that the student’s hand tremor was responsible for her being disabled in the circumstances. The social model of disability distinguishes impairment from disability in these words:

[A disability] is the disadvantage or restriction in activity caused by a contemporary social organization which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments, and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activities (Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation 1976, 3–4).

Resolution:

Border crossing here would have enabled the library staff in gaining access to and use input from diverse groups in

the community to anticipate needs, design service features and evaluate their adequacy and convenience for all categories of patrons. The apparent rigidity of “borders” between the student and staff as exhibited by the staff attitude and behaviors made it uncomfortable for the student to seek and receive help.

Diverse options, including assistive technology should have been made available to the students. Sensitivity training is also necessary to prepare the staff to present approachable demeanors and a socially inclusive service environment.

Case Study Three: “I May be Crazy, But I’m Not Stupid.”

A library staff, in a bid to be “helpful”, continued to scream at a blind student, even after he had informed her that he was not deaf, only blind. The screaming had however made the student uncomfortable, because he felt that the incident had attracted undue attention to him. When he asked for books on a subject, the staff came around to the patron and grabbed his arm leading him to the shelves.

Analysis:

The staff was exhibiting common responses in society to people with disabilities. First, any functional incapacity due to a specific disability is used as a basis for classifying an individual as invalid. The disability becomes a defining characteristic of the individual and the incapacity is generalized. This forms the basis for a “personal tragedy” approach within which the individual is regarded as a victim, and in need of help. This assumption also derives from societal perceptions of roles to which persons with disabilities were relegated until recently. The focus on the disability was an extension of the sick role in which the occupant was expected to suspend all their activities, and turn over their needs to help providers.

This assumption however fails to take into account, the fact that persons with long term disabilities learn to use alternative methods to accomplish tasks of daily living and working. The staff sought to effect the *equal outcome approach to equity*, but without regard to the patron’s feelings. The behavior of the staff seemed to be based on lack of informed contact with, and little knowledge about the blind and blindness, respectively. Finally, as with Case Study Two above, the staff assumed that impairment is synonymous with disability. People with disabilities are therefore expected to always need assistance and yet be incapable of reciprocating. Such beliefs predispose persons with disabilities to being pitied, despised, or sometimes viewed as taking advantage of society.

Resolution:

The rules of civil behavior which demand respect for the dignity of others, applies equally to people with disabilities. It is therefore not appropriate to touch them without their permission, or scream at them, even if we perceive such need. They also do not want to be pitied, or attract undue attention to themselves, especially when being portrayed as helpless and dependent. Like other members of society, some of them are shy and self-conscious. Undue attention might therefore create anxieties that interfere with their information seeking and learning activities in the library.

Case Study Four: Bibliographic Instruction, Anyone?

Flyers and other publicity leaflets on bibliographic instruction lessons for new students did not indicate wheelchair access or availability of interpreters. When a student with a disability inquired about accessibility of the program to him, he learned that his request could not be met because it was not cost efficient to provide such accommodation for only one patron.

Analysis:

This case study illustrates the policy of one library towards single patron needs. Should the library commit its scarce resources to provide access to one patron? How many is enough and how do you define and categorize each disability group?

The traditional market segmentation approach to services provision is not applicable to disability groups because of the wide range of disability definitions and taxonomies that exist. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990, for instance, lists thirteen disability categories for which children may be eligible for special education. This list is further regrouped on eight dimensions of behavior or individual characteristics. Within a single disability, overlaps with other categories and varying degrees of disability lead to conceptual and operational inconsistencies. It is therefore recommended that professionals seek to diagnose disability conditions as they affect individual’s needs on a case by case basis (McDonnell, McLaughlin, and Morison 1997).

The heterogeneity of persons with hearing impairment, for instance, illustrates this problem. Besides the vast diversity of degrees of hearing loss, there are differences between members who have congenial hearing loss and others who acquired it later in life, those who use American Sign Language (ASL), and others who do not. The hard of hearing and related linguistic cultures also include those

who can hear but may have grown up in an ASL environment, due to having parents who have a hearing loss. Many professionals who work with this group erroneously assume that ASL is a version of English. On the contrary, ASL is more like Chinese than English, and for those who use it, English is a second language. Another misconception about this group is that most members can lip-read. Less than 40 percent of people who are hard of hearing can lip-read and only about 20 percent of words can be lip-read accurately for a variety of reasons.

Resolution:

Even with budget constraints, the library policy must be informed by no less consideration for the interest of the student with a disability, as if she had no disability or was the only student in her academic program. If library resources are essential to the student's academic success, the library ought to seek all avenues, including cooperative arrangements with other library and rehabilitative services, near and far, to cater to their needs. Non availability of appropriate library resources would constitute denial of *equal access* to learning opportunities for such a student, relative to other students.

Students with disabilities should not be put in the uncomfortable situation of demanding for services, which the administration might deem cost prohibitive. Many have had to forego access to essential services, rather than be perceived as "trouble makers", by a college unit whose services are essential to their academic success. This would be particularly difficult where libraries are not socially inclusive and librarians "wear" unapproachable demeanors. It is disheartening for a student with a disability to realize that she is not "important" enough to have her needs met by the library, even when such needs are essential to her learning.

Case Study Five: "Do you Have a Problem or Something?"

A student who is hard of hearing needs to lip-read before she "hears" what is being said to her. A reference librarian was looking down at his computer and keyboarding while responding to the student's inquiry, making lip-reading difficult. When the student re-stated her question, the librarian snapped back: "Why don't you listen? I already answered your question. Is there something wrong with your hearing?" Even after he had been informed that the patron was hard of hearing, the librarian offered no apology, but promptly dismissed the student with the claim that her question was unclear. The librarian's impatient demeanor (there was a queue behind the student), and negative body lan-

guage made it impossible for the student to clarify her query statement.

Analysis:

Research has established that initial query statements are often unclear, requiring the use of techniques such as neutral questioning by reference librarians to get the patron to articulate his/her information need. Moreover, models for diagnosis needs in library literature assume that both librarian and patron do not have any disabilities likely to impact on their interaction. Even when they are both effective communicators, and share cultural backgrounds, query negotiation calls for tact and patience on the part of the librarian. Query negotiation involving a student with a communicative disability would call for even more tact and patience.

The librarian's attitude and behavior in this case was however, intimidating, and reflective of a status/power border between him and the patron. The barrage of questions exhibited intolerance, verging on harassment, while dismissal of the student's question shows discrimination based on her disability. Interactions such as this undermine the self-concept and confidence of students, impacting negatively on the tasks they seek to accomplish in the library. Such experience, which effectively denied the student *equal treatment* and *equal access* (to professional assistance), could discourage the student from seeking personal assistance from librarians in the future.

Resolution:

The student with a disability should not be made to feel less important than any other student. Rather than make her look stupid, the librarian could have referred her to another librarian who is more accommodating, and less busy at the time. The student could also be asked to return at an appointed time, if her need was not urgent. The situation ought to be explained to the student so she does not feel discriminated against because of her disability. When the librarian eventually negotiates the student's query, he must cross borders so as to understand the student and her problem situation, undistorted by her communicative disability.

Recommendations

The case studies point to the need for border crossing so that library staff can better anticipate and respond to the needs of the students. The following recommendations will collectively attenuate the psychosocial barriers that confront students with disabilities in academic libraries.

1. Awareness and Sensitivity Training: Organize Awareness and Sensitivity Training (AST) workshops designed

to raise staff consciousness regarding psychosocial issues with respect to serving students with disabilities and modifying their behaviors accordingly. As the case studies above illustrated, some library staff lacks the knowledge and appropriate disposition to be socially inclusive of students with disabilities. While some of their demeanors and behaviors may be typical reactions to all patrons, the staff might exhibit more signs of exasperation, and frustration (blank stares, loud sighs, etc.) when interacting with students with disabilities than they do when interacting with other students. Workshop activities including techniques of cognitive restructuring, role-playing, and behavior modeling would go a long way in helping participants confront their intolerance and impatience brought about by social stigma and stereotyping. Interaction exercises should be analyzed during debriefing sessions in which participants reflect upon and critique their own and other's behaviors for empathy, intellectual flexibility and perspective taking.

2. Confronting one's prejudice: Staff should be encouraged to review their interactions with patrons at the end of each day. The exercises should entail introspective thinking in which participants analyze their own knowledge and behavior repertoires, and identify their own prejudice. The AST workshops will help such librarians to substitute use of stereotypical knowledge and response mechanisms with individualized and thoughtful responses to individual student needs. Exercises in listening, and providing empathic feedback in egalitarian interactions will be undertaken. Like professionals in counseling and rehabilitative services, librarians incorrectly assume that some categories of students with disabilities are incapable of verbalizing their true needs and desires. Thus, librarians tend to ignore, or at best speak for, rather than listen to and jointly think through their information needs. According to Trieschmann,

We professionals often operate within a realm that greatly differs from the reality that is lived by persons with disabilities, and because of our social isolation from people with disabilities, we seldom realize how wide the schism is. (1987, 54)

4. Adopting peer groups: The library should adopt peer groups of students with disabilities, and host discussions in which they explore their disability, needs, experiences, and aspirations. These discussions would enable participants help one another gain insight, support, and offer suggestions for advocacy and action to address their common prob-

lems. They would also serve as a forum of communication between the various groups and the library, as well as build the image of the library as a campus ally. A librarian trained to serve as facilitator at these discussions could help them diagnose their problems, distinguishing those arising from social stigma and existing outside of themselves, from others that are inherent in their disabilities. Offering them a "safe" environment to talk about their disabilities, share their feelings and jointly plan and rehearse programs of action would help to fight the sense of isolation or frustration arising from the psychosocial barriers they face in higher education. This experience would also empower students with disabilities to become proactive in breaking down barriers and creating access.

5. Zero tolerance policy on discrimination: Just as library administration puts policies in place to meet ADA guidelines with respect to physical barriers, it ought to institute policies that spell out zero tolerance for psychosocial barriers in the library. Students with disabilities endure the kinds of discrimination described in the case studies above, without access to recourse. Offering AST workshops to library staff and publicizing a zero tolerance policy would send a clear signal to students that the library extends to them *at least*, equal treatment, and equal access rights as it does to students without disabilities.

6. Develop partnerships with other campus units: The library cannot provide for all the needs of students with disabilities alone. Being proactive requires coordinating information about needs before students arrive at the reference and circulation desks. Working with student counseling and other relevant units, the library could gain access to sources of resources, services, and personnel from within and without the college that might be otherwise inaccessible. Knowledge of border crossing from AST workshops and working with the peer groups (# 4 above), would position the library staff as key players in advocacy efforts aimed at reducing psychosocial barriers faced by students with disabilities all across campus.

Conclusion

Compliance with the ADA guidelines has centered on provision of physical access to the library building and services by the academic library community. These efforts have also emphasized institutional and administrative responsibilities for implementation. Scant attention has been paid to psychosocial barriers which students with disabilities face as a result of the negative perceptions, attitudes and behaviors of library staff. Since positive self concept and self

efficacy are implicated in learning and information use processes, it is likely that psychosocial barriers undermine the physical access gains attained by students with disabilities as a result of ADA compliance.

Border crossing would enable library staff attenuate these barriers by moving away from the professional/patron power difference, and beyond the use of stereotypical knowledge to give voice to the true identities and needs of students. While border crossing is similar to query negotiation and information counseling strategies, its focus on minimizing status and power differences is uniquely suited to addressing the social stigma problem with respect to library patrons with disability. AST workshops, campus and community partnerships, anti-discrimination policies, recruitment of staff with disabilities and adoption of peer discussion groups are some strategies that could position the academic library as leaders in the effort to go beyond provision of equal physical access to ensuring equal educational outcomes for all students, including those with disabilities.

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