

Disability- and Accessibility-Related Library Graduate-School Education from the Student Perspective

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This study explored library graduate student perceptions of their readiness for and comfort levels in doing activities related to accessibility and disability. The study also aimed to determine the training needs of library graduate students. A survey with both quantitative and qualitative questions was developed, snowball sampling was used, and the survey was administered in the fall of 2018. Analysis of both data types indicates that library graduate students generally feel unprepared to work with patrons with disabilities or address activities related to accessibility. Based on the results, there are several recommendations for improvement within library graduate education, including incorporating accessibility and disability more robustly into the current curriculum, creating training/education programs that teach practical skills, including how to troubleshoot assistive technologies, and recruiting and retaining students and faculty who have disabilities.

Keywords: curriculum needs, disability, graduate students, survey methodology, training needs

Linda Walling’s (2004) essay “Educating Students to Serve Information Seekers with Disabilities” sparked the genesis of this research in that she reported on a survey of library graduate-school deans and directors in regard to what education was being provided to students “related to ADA [Americans with Disabilities Act], services for people with disabilities, and adaptive technologies” (Walling, 2004, pp. 137–138). Walling’s findings concluded that a little over half of the schools that responded to the survey were ensuring that students were receiving the bare minimum of information about the ADA and working with patrons with disabilities. One of Walling’s suggestions for future study

KEY POINTS:

- LIS graduate students generally feel that the education they received about disability and accessibility is inadequate.
- In particular, LIS graduate students would like more practical education on topics related to disability and accessibility.
- LIS graduate students are also keenly aware of a lack of diversity, equity, and inclusion discussion and priorities in their educations.

was to survey current library employees to see how well they felt they were prepared by their graduate programs to work with patrons with disabilities in the workplace. While her recommendation was for current library employees, this raised the question of what the students themselves felt about their educational experiences as they prepared to begin their professional careers in libraries. Professors and programs create courses that cover a wide range of material that is meant to educate and enrich the students as they prepare for their upcoming careers. However, there often is a disconnect between what is being taught, what is being learned, and what is needed. This study focuses on a survey that was administered via social media and email invitation that specifically asked library graduate students about their perceived comfort with interacting with patrons with disabilities, and about their perceived readiness for working with patrons with disabilities.

Literature review

There is very little literature on library-school education and matters of diversity and even less on issues specifically related to disability. Walling's (2004) article is one of the few that focuses on disability in the Library and Information Sciences (LIS) curriculum. Walling readily references Merrilyn Gibson's (1977) earlier work, in which Gibson also surveyed library schools to determine what, if anything, they were teaching to prepare students to work with "handicapped individuals" upon graduation. Gibson's findings were that library schools were not teaching about disability but that they were willing to do so. Some 27 years later, Walling's survey showed that even with the addition of federal legislation requiring accommodating people with disabilities in our public buildings and workspaces, library schools still had not fully embraced teaching library students how to navigate issues of disability and accessibility beyond a bare minimum. Bonnici, Maatta, and Wells (2009) reported on the results of a survey they conducted that was aimed at librarians working in the National Library Services for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (BPH). While most of their findings are not germane to this article, they did ask the participants if they felt that library and information science education programs were adequately preparing new graduates to work in BPH libraries. Of the respondents who answered, 55.3% said that no, library science graduate programs were not adequately preparing students to work in BPH libraries (Bonnici et al., 2009, p. 521). Bonnici, Maatta, Brodsky, and Steele (2015) published a follow-up article in which they again surveyed BPH library employees using the same survey instrument. This time, 68% of respondents indicated that LIS programs were not adequately preparing students to work in BPH libraries (Bonnici et al., 2015, p. 511). To fill this increasing vacuum, library-school students themselves are beginning to actively create networks to fill the perceived void. Rebecca Oxley (2013) outlines the creation of a student group at

the University of Maryland, called iDiversity, which was meant to foster discussion about diversity issues and bolster inclusion of diversity topics into the curriculum. Oxley's development of a student group points to a noticeable lack within the profession of formalized education around diversity for students.

This deficit of incorporating diversity and inclusion into the educational bedrock of library professionals is discussed in several articles. Jaeger, Bertot, and Subramaniam (2013) in particular issue a call to action to adapt LIS curriculum much more quickly than has been true in the past. In particular, they state, "To meet the information needs of this increasingly diverse society, all of our graduates need to be culturally competent from the moment they graduate. This means being ready to work with patrons of all the different populations ..." (Jaeger et al. 2013, p. 244). They go on to advocate for LIS programs to embrace experimentation and rapid iteration in order to better meet the needs of current LIS professionals. While Jaeger et al. (2013) are calling for increased diversity and inclusion in the curriculum, Bonnici, Maatta, Wells, Brodsky, and Meadows (2012) delve deeper into how diversity is being defined, especially as it relates to disability and social justice. Their key finding is that the LIS curriculum often treats disability and social diversity, such as homelessness, as individual topics and not as part of a larger whole (society) that has to be addressed through a more cohesive philosophical approach that uses social justice at its core (Bonnici et al., 2012, p. 125).

Methodology

Using Walling's (2004) article as a base, as the survey instrument was not attached to the article, nor was it available from the University of South Carolina where Walling's papers are kept, a survey was created that was specifically aimed at students rather than administrators. The internet-based survey, using the Qualtrics platform, was distributed across both email and social media in the fall of 2018. The survey was open for two weeks, with reminders sent out every few days across social media and email listservs. Snowball sampling was used in order to gather as many responses as possible.

For the purpose of the survey, "library graduate student" was defined as anyone currently enrolled in a library graduate-degree program. Respondents could also be current library employees as long as they were also currently enrolled students.

There were a total of 187 validated responses to the survey. There were 11 questions, with two questions being open-ended (qualitative) and the other nine being multiple choice (quantitative). Questions ranged from what jobs students were interested in to their comfort level performing accessibility tasks like reviewing policies for accessibility and troubleshooting assistive technologies (see Appendix).

Results

When asked what kind of information environment they would most like to work in, 41.4% respondents said academic libraries, 31.5% said public libraries, with the rest distributed across archives, government, museums, special, and other. In terms of department that the respondents indicated they wished to work in, 24.3% selected instruction and reference and 21.6% selected public services, with the rest selecting in the single digits: administration, archives, cataloging, conservation, metadata, outreach, preservation, scholarly communications, subject liaison, and other. This indicates that 45.9% of respondents expect to work with the public for a great deal of the time in their jobs.

Comfort

Respondents were asked about their comfort level with various activities related to accessibility/disability based on the education that they had received. As seen in Figure 1, the single largest area of discomfort was

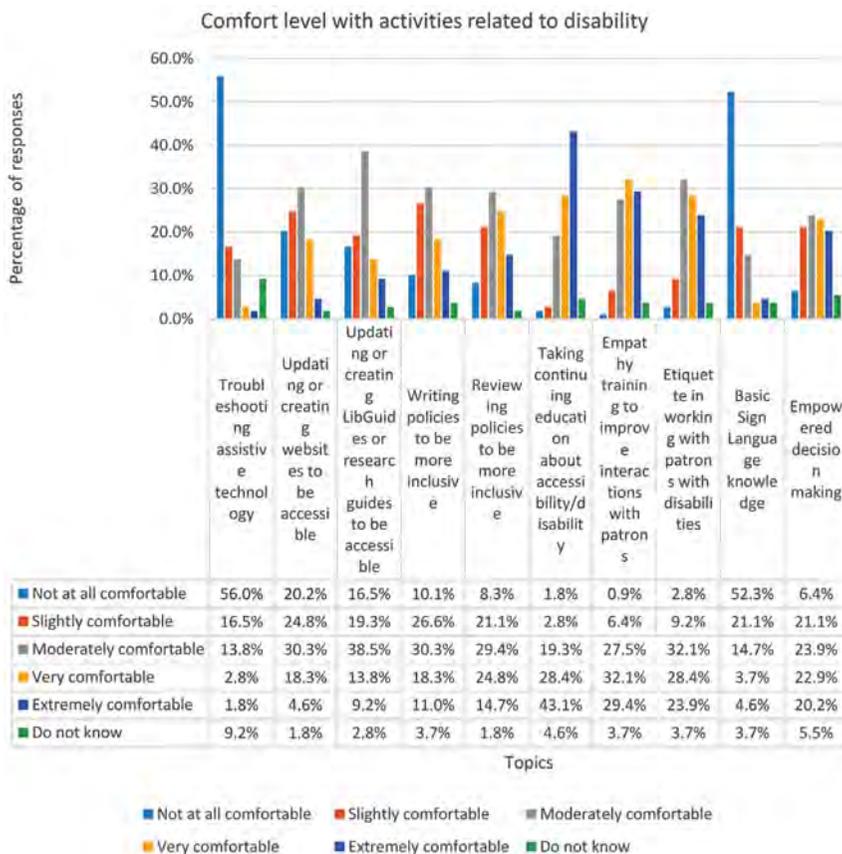


Figure 1: Respondents' comfort level with activities related to disability/accessibility

troubleshooting assistive technology, followed closely by basic sign language. The two areas of greatest comfort were learning about accessibility/disability topics and getting empathy training to improve interactions with patrons. An area of interest, and possible further research, is the even distribution across most comfort levels with regard to empowered decision making.

Activities

Respondents were asked how relevant they felt certain activities would be in their first job after graduation. According to Figure 2, the most relevant topic was etiquette in working with patrons with disabilities, followed by the need for empathy training. Somewhat surprisingly, the most non-relevant topic was troubleshooting assistive technology, followed by basic sign language. On the other hand, as roughly half of respondents don't intend to be working often with the public, these results make sense.

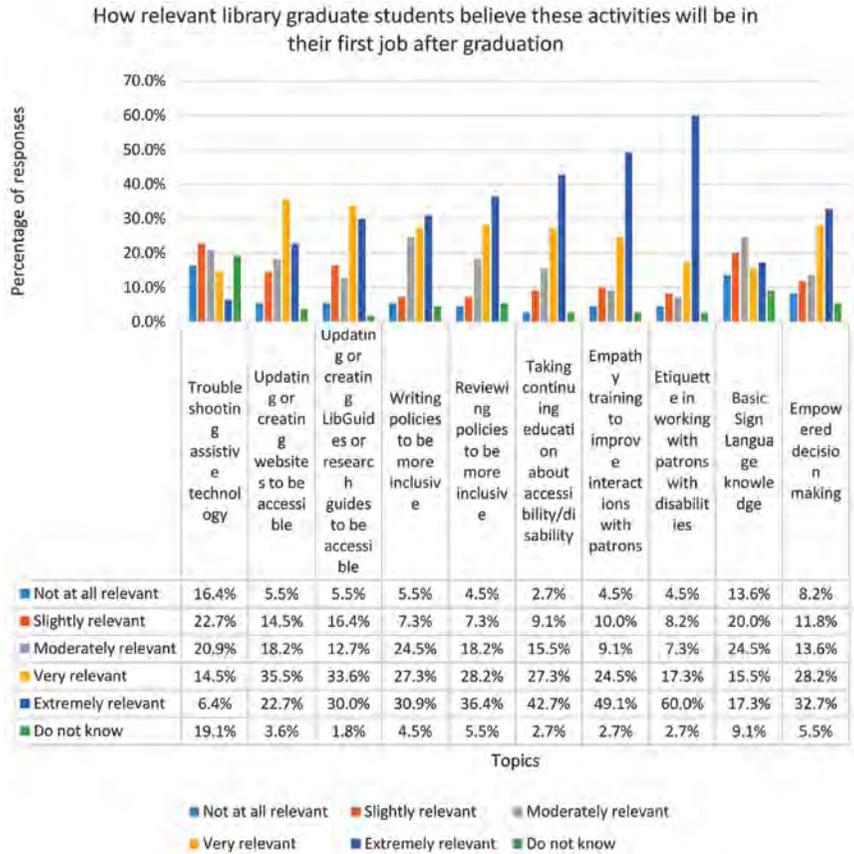


Figure 2: Perceived relevance of various accessibility activities to library graduate students' first jobs

Respondents were then asked how relevant they felt the same topics would be in five years to their jobs. The chart in Figure 3 reveals that respondents felt that the top two extremely relevant topics, only 0.5% apart in importance, were etiquette in working with people with disabilities and reviewing policies to be more inclusive. The two least relevant were troubleshooting assistive technology and basic sign language.

Preparedness

Respondents were asked how well they felt their library graduate-school education had prepared them to work with patrons with disabilities. Figure 4 shows that only 7% felt extremely well or very well prepared to assist patrons with disabilities.

Respondents were then asked how well they felt they had been prepared by library graduate programs to address accessibility issues. Figure 5

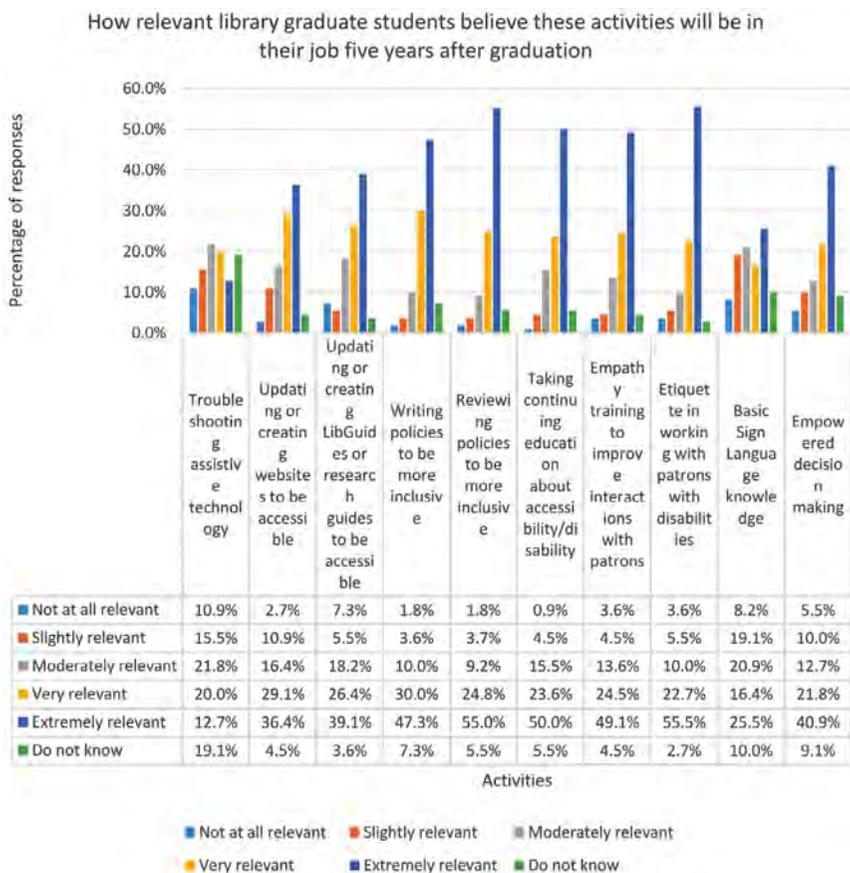


Figure 3: Perceived relevance of various accessibility activities to library graduate students’ jobs in five years

How well library graduate students feel they are prepared to assist patrons with disabilities

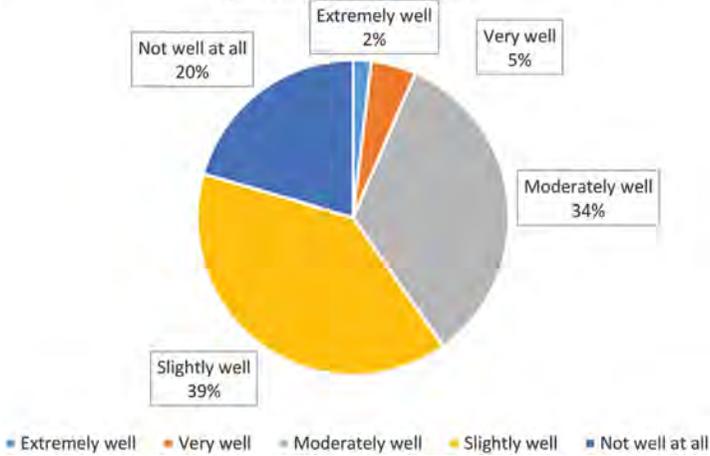


Figure 4: Pie chart showing how well library graduate students feel that library graduate school prepared them to work with people with disabilities

How well library graduate students feel prepared to address accessibility issues by their graduate program

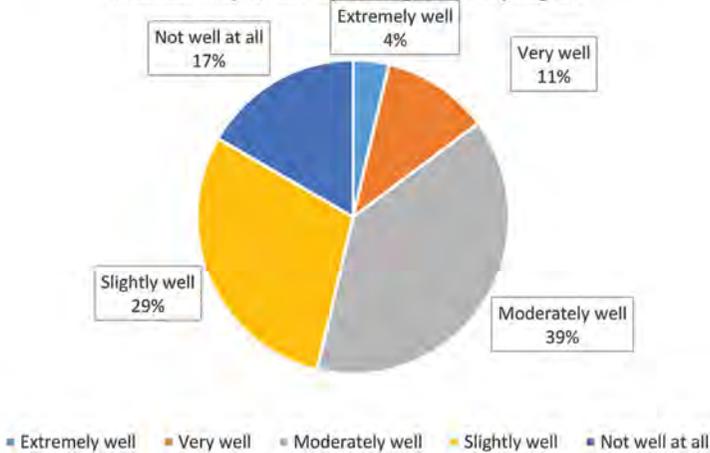


Figure 5: Pie chart showing how well library graduate students feel prepared by library graduate school to address accessibility issues.

reveals that only 15% of library graduate students felt that they had been extremely well or very well prepared to address accessibility issues.

Training formats

Respondents were also asked how interested they were in receiving training about accessibility and disability. Some 87.28% of respondents indicated that they were extremely interested or very interested in getting

training. Library graduate students were asked about what training formats they would prefer in regard to receiving more training about disability/ accessibility issues. Figure 6 shows that library graduate students felt that one-day workshops were the training format that they were most interested in to learn about disability and accessibility topics.

The survey also included an opportunity for respondents to share their thoughts about how they felt their education to date had prepared them for working with patrons with disabilities. There was also an additional comments section. The following discussion and analysis are taken from the qualitative portions of the survey.

Educational preparation

As the survey was focused largely on respondents' education in library graduate programs, their responses ranged from "We haven't covered this topic at all" to more nuanced responses including what topics had been covered, the quality of the education they had received, and areas that need improvement.

Topics (not) covered

Respondents talked broadly about what topics had been covered by their library graduate-school educations. A recurring theme throughout many

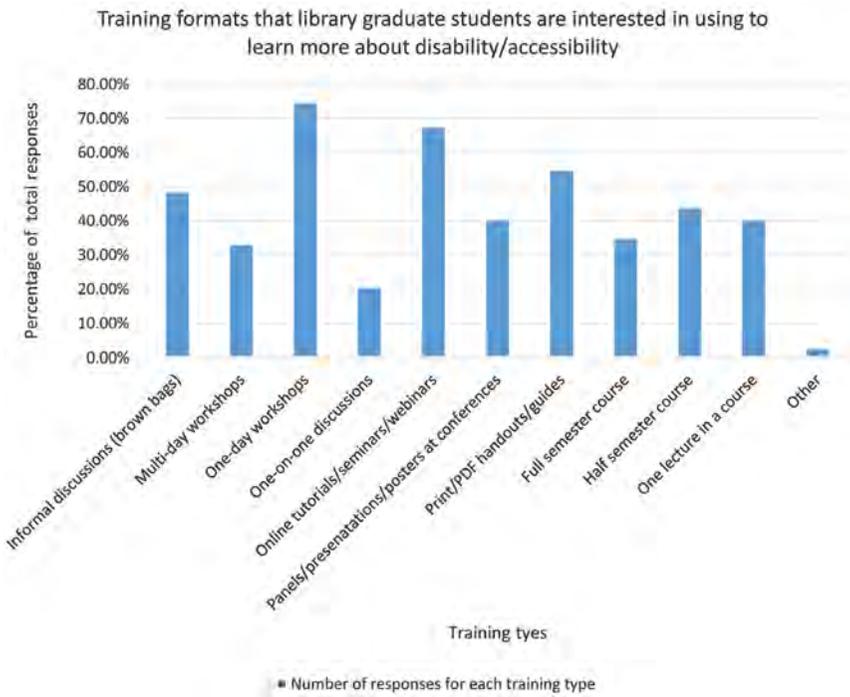


Figure 6: Preferred training formats for learning more about accessibility/disability

of the responses was that library graduate programs didn't sufficiently cover the topics related to accessibility and disability. This comment typifies many of the responses that were received: "My education hasn't discussed much about disabilities. We talked about being ADA compliant in terms of physical space and about being aware of how your spaces impacts those with sensory issues, but that's about it. We did not talk about assistive technologies or policies." This example shows that library graduate programs might cover the bare minimum discussion in regard to the requirements of the ADA but that programs don't generally dive deeper than that. This is demonstrated even in subject-specific classes. One respondent discussed their web/digital courses by saying, "I have learned that accessibility regarding web development is extremely important and been introduced to WCAG guidelines, but I don't know how to actually put it into practice." While the respondent learned more about the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), which are generally universally accepted as the standard that web content should adhere to in order to be accessible, they also point out that there was no practical discussion on how to apply the guidelines or, probably, how to test for them. The lack of practical application is also shown in how respondents are being educated in terms of working with patrons who have disabilities. One respondent pointed out that they didn't just want to know the legal requirements, "but also the interpersonal and dynamics of inclusion/exclusion that are less visible to me as a person without disabilities." This again points to a lack of education around practical application—how to interact with people with disabilities in ways that are actually helpful to them when you don't have a disability yourself.

Quality of education

This section examines more closely the perceptions around the quality of education that respondents have received. By far and large, respondents indicated that topics about accessibility and disability were not generally part of the curriculum and instead had been discussed because of fellow students' or individual professors' interests: "The education I have received about accessibility/working with patrons with disabilities really depended on the knowledge of the students and faculty around me. It was not integrated in the LIS curriculum." Another respondent also voiced a similar statement with the addition of conference education and self-guided learning as part of their educational background: "The only real education I have gotten is from fellow students who are self-advocates, from a conference, and research that I have done myself. I do not feel our library school courses address these issues enough, and I feel inadequately prepared to push for a more inclusive space at my workplace as a result." An important issue raised by the respondent in their last phrase is that they "feel inadequately prepared." This feeling of inadequacy is mentioned by other respondents as well and illustrates a deficit in training as well as

emotional discomfort. A respondent not only mentions feeling inadequate but also points to a potential reason: “I feel really self-conscious when I’m working with patrons with disabilities because I don’t know what the right and wrong etiquette is.” Here, they are specifically mentioning etiquette but they aren’t alone in specifying where their discomfort is in terms of lack of education in accessibility and disability topics. While many comments focused on interactions with patrons, not all respondents were working toward being a public-facing librarian. Two comments focused on the accessibility of digital objects, thereby highlighting the fact that respondents were concerned with more than face-to-face patron interactions: “My education ... has not provided any explicit recommendations for ensuring accessibility through the lifecycle of digital objects and technologies. I am concerned that, from the back-end of library functions, accessibility, particular[ly] for patrons with visual impairments, is not at the forefront of developers thoughts.” This is an important comment because it illustrates that libraries continue to subscribe to a retrofit model of accessibility rather than an inclusive Universal Design model that has accessibility incorporated into the beginning stages of planning/designing services, software, and the like, and not added as an afterthought.

Areas for improvement

While respondents expressed frustration with the education that they had received, they also articulated what they would like to see improved. In particular, one respondent strongly advocated for Universal Design and a greater general awareness of how people with disabilities fit into the everyday lives of libraries: “Accessibility should be baked into every relevant course, not as a second thought but as another track of thought, from building accessible websites to creating accessible library buildings. Our disabled patrons should always be at the center of our thoughts, along with all of our marginalized and under-served communities.” Other respondents pointed out what hasn’t been focused on in the graduate-school educations that they have received; by identifying specific aspects of accessibility and disability that are not covered, they indicated what library graduate programs need to start incorporating into the curriculum. For instance, one respondent stated, “I think that etiquette, technical competence with assistive devices, and empathy training have not been emphasized or addressed in any of my classes. Neither has basic sign.” While incorporating these suggestions into library graduate education would go a long way toward creating more aware and more competent librarians, a key observation from a respondent about theory versus practical application really draws out the disconnect between what is learned in library graduate school and what is actually needed in the working world: “My MLIS program is ... far too worried about theory and does not have nearly enough about practice. It’s been very frustrating for me.” This clearly indicates an area that needs attention in graduate programs. If students are

entering the workforce underprepared with practical skills, then library graduate programs are doing students a disservice.

Lack of inclusion

Respondents also discussed a lack of inclusion within the profession and how that lack of inclusion creates work environments that directly affect both patrons and employees. In particular, one respondent pointed out that the profession doesn't focus on disabilities other than physical ones, but also that library administrations are also often reticent in working with those groups or going beyond the legally required minimum:

I am concerned about being an inclusive place that all people can feel safe and welcomed in. I have attended workshops specifically addressing needs of patrons on the Autism spectrum, and I realized that my current workplace does not even come close to being accessible or welcoming to people on the spectrum, people with sight impairments, or even people with learning disabilities. We do not have great signage, let alone signage with pictures as opposed to words, there are no places for patrons to go when they need a quiet, calming space, we do not offer resources to these patrons, and it is very concerning to me. I have brought it up to my supervisors and have gotten nowhere and I really feel we should be doing more.

This feeling of “doing more” was also discussed by another respondent, who further articulated that not only are there fundamental problems in how libraries operate that make them inherently inaccessible, but there are also attitudes within the profession that make it very difficult to move forward in creating accessible spaces and services: “I think there’s also significant gaps in how libraries have always functioned and being accessible. Closed stacks and special collections are not accessible for patrons with disabilities, and I think there are a lot of old fashioned librarians (in academia, at least) who hold on to the notion of ‘problem patrons,’ which is often an ableist way of describing patrons why may have disabilities.” The issue of “problem patrons” has been discussed in several contexts, including the typical “how to deal with them” approach (Blessinger, 2002) and the notion that referring to people who are different as “problem patrons” is problematic itself (Pionke, 2017a). Respondents themselves also pointed out the ableist nature of the phrase and how othering people with disabilities leads to an apartheid of services: “The tendency to think of patrons with disabilities as fundamentally different. So instead of thinking about equity we start thinking like resources should be separate but equal.” This idea of separate but equal is furthered by the exclusion of the voices of people with disabilities with respect to decisions that directly affect them: “I feel there isn’t enough input from people with disabilities in

policy/decision making regarding people with disabilities.” This exclusion of the voices of people with disabilities is prevalent in the literature (see, e.g., Pionke, 2017b).

Discussion

While this study cannot be generalized because of the sampling method, the findings are an indication that there are definitely concerns from library graduate students about what they are being taught in regard to accessibility and disability and its application to their working environment when they matriculate from library graduate programs. When one examines both the quantitative and qualitative portions of the survey responses, three major trends emerge. Practical application education is needed as much as, or perhaps more than, the theory education that students are already learning around issues of accessibility and disability. Empathy, the ability to relate to and understand others where they are on an emotional level, was a stated need by survey respondents. Lastly, valuing inclusion in decision making, research, spaces, and services, was also indicated as a need.

Practical education

Several comments pointed to a need within the library graduate-school curriculum to teach more practical skills and not just library theory. Several library programs, such as the one at the University of Michigan, offer credit for, and strongly recommend doing, an internship between the first and second years of the master’s degree program. The profession also recognizes the need for more practical education when a student is enrolled in a library graduate-degree program, especially in the form of experiential learning. Currim (2011, p. 301), in her article about the Internet Public Library and its successful use of experiential learning in teaching reference skills, examines several reasons why experiential learning is not more integrated into curricula, in general: “time, resources, incentives, and local conditions.” In academic work environments that too often focus on research to the detriment of good teaching, a time-intensive curriculum like experiential learning that has students practicing skills in real-world environments is often not incentivized. In order to better align employment needs with library graduate-school education, practical education—which could include experiential learning and service learning—is highly recommended.

Empathy building

Library employees who work with the public often have a lot of empathy and patience when they assist patrons who bring a wide range of questions and behaviors to the library. However, more often than not, such empathy and patience are not formally taught in library graduate programs. More specifically, very little time is spent in most programs discussing or experiencing perspective taking, let alone how to de-escalate violent behavior. Couched in larger terms, valuing Universal Design in all aspects

of librarianship means that library employees have undergone training that involves perspective taking so that they are aware of the unique needs of different groups of people, regardless of what those differences are. Perspective taking also builds understanding and empathy for people that are different from oneself. Empathy is a part of perspective taking and is a core element in making connections to people. Brené Brown (2018, p. 148), a leading expert on empathy, vulnerability, and courage, reminds us what empathy is: “first: I take the perspective of another person, meaning I become the listener and the student, not the knower. Second: I stay out of judgement. And third and fourth: I try to understand what emotion they’re articulating and communicate my understanding of that emotion.” This last part, understanding the emotion that another person is trying to express and then reflecting your understanding back to them, is perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of empathy to understand, in large part because in order to understand other people’s emotions, you have to understand your own emotions first. The skill of understanding emotions is called Emotional Intelligence: “your ability to recognize and understand emotions in yourself and others, and your ability to use this awareness to manage your behavior and relationships” (Bradberry & Greaves, 2009, p. 17). Emotional Intelligence is not a generally taught skill in almost any graduate program, except perhaps social work and psychology. Considering that libraries have moved from being repositories of books to being both repositories of information as well as community centers, Emotional Intelligence is a highly desirable skill for library employees who interact with the public. These three skills—empathy, perspective taking, and Emotional Intelligence—form an emotional core of how to interact with people who are different from ourselves.

Valuing inclusion

Academia and the library profession spend a lot of time discussing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). However, these discussions often look more like tokenism than inclusion. It is well documented that diverse individuals who are tokenized within the academy do more poorly in terms of being on the tenure track because they are overburdened with being the diverse individual on every initiative and committee, they do not have adequate mentors, their work is devalued because it is diverse, and so on (Kelly & McCann, 2014, p. 683). This also extends into librarianship where, in 2017, 86.7% of respondents to an American Library Association survey indicated that they were white (Rosa & Henke, 2017, p. 2). This is contrasted with, from the same study, only 2.91% of respondents indicating that they had a disability, which is well below the global average of 15% as put forth by the World Health Organization (2014). The fact that librarians are so white and aren’t self-identifying as having disabilities is troubling and indicates that there are serious problems with DEI in the profession. Hiring and retaining diverse individuals in library

graduate programs matters because representation matters. Encouraging the development of not just a diversity course but also diversity elements as a common thread in all courses and aspects of library graduate-school education will go a long way toward creating a more inclusive educational experience and profession.

Limitations

There are several limitations associated with this study. As snowball sampling was used, the study's results are not generalizable to the entire library graduate-student population. To encourage participation, demographic information, including the program that the respondent was enrolled in, was not recorded so for this study, there is no way to know if the results are being skewed toward a particular school or geographical location.

Conclusion

The survey indicates a trend within library graduate education that is exclusive of teaching library graduate students practically and adequately about disability and accessibility. Students themselves indicate that they want better education about these topics and want to learn more about diversity, equity, and inclusion in order to better serve the communities that they will be entering once they matriculate. There are several areas of further research that could assist library graduate programs in meeting the needs of library graduate students, including, but not limited to, examining the hiring and retention practices of diverse individuals within each program; analyzing the content of courses for diversity, equity, and inclusion; and examining the attitudes and expertise of current professors toward diverse individuals and diversity, equity, and inclusion topics.

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Appendix

Survey Questions

1. Upon graduation from library graduate school, which of the following library type best represents where you would most like to work?
Academic, Archives, Government, Museums, Public, Special, Other
2. In your ideal job, what department would you like to work in?
Administration, Archives, Cataloging, Conservation, Instruction and Reference, Metadata, Outreach, Preservation, Public Services, Scholarly Communications, Subject Liaison, Other
3. The activities below are focused on accessibility and working with patrons with disabilities. How relevant do you feel each activity will be to your first job upon graduation?
Troubleshooting assistive technology software like JAWS, Kurzweil, or ZoomText, Updating or creating websites to be accessible, Updating or creating LibGuides or research guides to be accessible, Writing policies to be more inclusive, Reviewing policies to be

more inclusive, Taking continuing education (webinars, seminars, classes, etc.) around accessibility and disability, Empathy training to improve interactions with patrons, Etiquette in working with patrons with disabilities, Basic sign language knowledge, Empowered decision making (forgiving fines, making exceptions, etc.)

Not at all relevant, Slightly relevant, Moderately relevant, Very relevant, Do not know

4. How relevant do you feel each activity will be to your job in FIVE YEARS?

Troubleshooting assistive technology software like JAWS, Kurzweil, or ZoomText, Updating or creating websites to be accessible, Updating or creating LibGuides or research guides to be accessible, Writing policies to be more inclusive, Reviewing policies to be more inclusive, Taking continuing education (webinars, seminars, classes, etc.) around accessibility and disability, Empathy training to improve interactions with patrons, Etiquette in working with patrons with disabilities, Basic sign language knowledge, Empowered decision making (forgiving fines, making exceptions, etc.)

Not at all relevant, Slightly relevant, Moderately relevant, Very relevant, Do not know

5. For each of the activities listed below, please rate how comfortable you are when performing them:

Troubleshooting assistive technology software like JAWS, Kurzweil, or ZoomText, Updating or creating websites to be accessible, Updating or creating LibGuides or research guides to be accessible, Writing policies to be more inclusive, Reviewing policies to be more inclusive, Taking continuing education (webinars, seminars, classes, etc.) around accessibility and disability, Empathy training to improve interactions with patrons, Etiquette in working with patrons with disabilities, Basic sign language knowledge, Empowered decision making (forgiving fines, making exceptions, etc.)

Not at all comfortable, Slightly comfortable, Moderately comfortable, Very comfortable, Do not know

6. Based on the education you have received so far, please describe any specific concerns you have related to accessibility in the library and/or working with patrons with disabilities.

Free text response

7. How interested would you be in receiving training about accessibility and disability?

Extremely interested, very interested, moderately interested, slightly interested, not at all interested

8. Which of the following training formats would you be most interested in (select all that apply):

Information discussions (brown bags), Multi-day workshops, One-day workshops, One-on-one discussions, Online tutorials, seminars/webinars, Panels/presentations/posters at conferences, Print/PDF handouts/guides, Full semester course, Half semester course, One lecture in a course, Other

9. How well has your library graduate school education prepared you to work with patrons with disabilities?

Extremely well, Very well, Moderately well, Slightly well, Not well at all

10. How well has your library graduate school education prepared you to address accessibility issues?

Extremely well, Very well, Moderately well, Slightly well, Not well at all

11. Please provide any additional comments you may have about the education you have received about accessibility and/or working with patrons with disabilities.

Free text response