

Nicollette Davis, Mondo Vaden, Marco Seiferle-Valencia, Jess Saldaña, and DeAnn Brame

The Library is NOT for Everyone (Yet)

Disability, Accommodations, and Working in Libraries

Academic Library Workers in Conversation is a *C&RL News* series focused on elevating the everyday conversations of library professionals. The wisdom of the watercooler has long been heralded, but this series hopes to go further by minimizing barriers to traditional publishing with an accessible format. Each of the topics in the series were proposed by the authors and they were given space to explore. This issue's conversation reflects on the experiences of people with disabilities working in academic libraries. The authors make it clear that we need to elevate these voices and experiences to build better libraries in the future.—*Dustin Fife, series editor*

Nicollette Davis: First of all, thank you all for being a part of this conversation. I want to acknowledge how much energy and labor it takes to share these experiences. Acknowledgment is not enough—I hope that we can create and continue to dream about a future that includes all of us. How does “The library is for everyone” apply in academic libraries (or fail to apply)?

Marco Seiferle-Valencia: I wish more librarians would be open to how limiting the concept of “everyone” is when many librarians are starting with a limited image of who everyone is. A library that actually serves everyone is one that thinks deeply and expansively about its spaces, services, and offerings and iterates with an expansive and diverse library user population in mind. I’m talking fat weight-rated chairs, fragrance-free policies, dimmed spaces for light sensitivity, multilingual staff with pay differentials for those skills, meaningful and accessible interpretation services, support for remote work, and more.

Mondo Vaden: I feel like it fails to apply. The academic library is one that has a limited range of people who can use it effectively. Not everyone is able to attend a university with an academic library with its curated selections.

As someone who has navigated academia, the library was someplace that I considered home. You don’t need to be able to hear to read! But as I entered the librarian field and tried to recreate that comfort of “home,” I hit roadblock after roadblock in regards to accommodations. I felt a distinctive barrier between my love of libraries and the fact that libraries are supposed to be for all, but they would rather *serve* people like me than allow me to have a say.

DeAnn Brame: “Everyone” is such a loaded word. In truth no space is for everyone. I think when we throw this word around, it allows us to escape being intentional about who we are

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creating this space for. In marketing, you have your target audience. You spend time thinking about the demographics of the population you're trying to reach and their needs. Why wouldn't libraries do the same? By saying the space is for everyone you fail certain populations of people you say you serve. This includes not only patrons but library workers as well. Put in the work and be intentional about the space you are creating, from the furniture to signage, to the technology. Consider your digital space and the offerings you have for those that aren't in the physical library space. Ask the right questions instead of settling for "this is good enough" for most people. We all deserve better.

Jess Saldaña: The notion that academic libraries are for "everyone" is deeply flawed. To even have this idea is to erase the populations they are not set up to serve. To respond to the space of the academic library one must also consider the academy it is held within. These institutions are designed to exclude, typically prioritizing an able-bodied, white population. BIPOC, queer, disabled communities often create spaces within them in order to survive. The library can mirror the flaws of the hyper-capitalistic logics of the university. So no, academic libraries are not for everyone. Oftentimes libraries are perceived as the commons, but we must think specifically about how these libraries interact with marginalized bodies and if their resources are accessible to all. Could there be a radical imaginary that considers these bodies before they arrive in library space?

Nicollette: These are such great points—the library for everyone is very one dimensional. I have coworkers (disabled and not) who have been very helpful and constantly care about my comfort, and I wish it was embedded in everyone's workplace on a systemic level. I think that libraries want to seem as welcoming as possible to patrons, but they often do not extend that same grace to their own workers, which is very performative. Have you all experienced this? As we enter 2024, how has pandemic backlash resulted in your library "rolling back" protections, liberties, and access?

Marco: Great question, Nicollette. My library did have some remote operations during the peak pandemic debut year, but overall, the organization rapidly returned to in-person as soon as possible. So we didn't necessarily see a huge expansion in remote work for the overall organization and then subsequent rollbacks, but most of our roles did get to experiment with remote work. Practically speaking, I'd love to see managers take the positive lessons of remote work and build in more capacity for staff roles to have flexibility and freedoms as the work allows, versus what productivity culture demands. Even making sure staff have the coverage and depth to take existing leave time can be a powerful way to apply some of the pandemic's lessons.

Mondo: I would love to see that buy-in from managers! I realized mid-pandemic that my public library workplace at the time was actively avoiding my accommodations. They did not consider applying my accommodation requests for nearly two years into the pandemic, where I was having to self-accommodate because everyone was wearing masks and I was still expected to function as a lip reader. When I had a mental breakdown from the stress of this experience, they hired an able-bodied person who knew sign language to replace my role and enable them to remove me from my position. It felt poetic, in that being open about my accommodations opened me to be in a position where I am no longer able to work in traditional libraries.

Recently, information was released that in 2022, 77 percent of discrimination complaints were coming from disability complaints. Backlash is very real, and I'm not the only one who has experienced it.

Nicollette: I'm so sorry to hear about your experience, Mondo. It reminds me that I want to help people and share my knowledge and skills, but also honor myself and my own needs. There's space to do both, but it often feels like we must pick and choose. When I struggled with a debilitating injury a few years ago, and then again as I was about to become an academic librarian, I asked some librarians in an online forum how they accommodated their disability, especially on large campuses and within the classroom. Most people shared that they pushed through the pain and did what they could. Starting a new job is exciting and can produce some feelings of anxiety, but it's especially heightened when you expect suffering. And that's what it is: lack of accommodation is inflicting suffering. It's often seen as a "perk," and to some able-bodied folks it's seen as "unfair." But, to me, when you choose to not accommodate, you're contributing to harm.

DeAnn: We were made to go back to work physically as soon as vaccines were widely available. We found out on a Thursday that we would need to be back in the office or have a plan for the following Monday. I remember thinking how much healthier mentally and emotionally I felt after being able to work from home. It took the pandemic and being sent home to make me realize that I didn't need to end more days than not with headaches from bright lights and constant noise. That I didn't need to go take a walk anytime someone brought in something that made me physically nauseous. That I can focus a little less on mitigating the effects of an environment I had no control over and more on my actual work. I know I'm not the only one. I've been in two other libraries since then, and some have tried to find a balance between policy (and politics) and the needs of their staff. I often ask myself how it is that people don't realize those protections and measures that were put in place during the height of the pandemic protected workers and patrons from far more than the virus.

Jess: I think there is an active kind of gaslighting that is happening in the workplace right now, and it is exhausting. The power dynamics are amplified, and there is an incredible pressure to succumb to the idea that the pandemic is over. It's a huge stressor to have to move against the will of these institutions, which disregard personal health concerns.

In one of my former library roles, I worked with media- and art-related services. My bosses really wanted to get rid of Zoom streaming requests altogether. On one end of the argument, our center in the library was now responsible for providing this "extra" type of media service to the entire college without the infrastructure to support it. On the other hand, getting rid of Zoom streaming services altogether would be a move backwards, and would make things less accessible for those who have needs that require them to remain at home. I found the access consideration to be largely overlooked when my boss would complain about having so many requests.

Ironically, the people arguing for ending these remote services had completely remote or hybrid schedules. So, it was difficult to speak about this because oftentimes the labor would fall on me to provide the in-person service, which sometimes resulted in grueling workdays behind a camera streaming an evening lecture series. So, if I were to state that this was an access issue, I was in a double bind. Looking back, my bosses were largely out of touch with the amount of labor I performed, the community they were serving, and their role within it. I was also the only full time POC hired in the library center at the time, which made every negative interaction feel like it was coated with microaggressions. It is a huge stressor to have to move against the will of your boss, especially as someone embodying multiple marginalized identities who is trying to speak up for access rights.

Nicollette: As we have discussed this at length, here and in various Zoom calls over the past several months, a common theme that I have noticed from all of us is that part of the exhaustion is getting people who do not occupy these identities to care on a deeper level. This out-of-sight, out-of-mind (or “we’ll cross that bridge when we get there”) mentality has not worked and will never work. Where do we go from here?

DeAnn: While reflecting on this piece, I realized how much I masked. I have been spending time unlearning a skill that I should not have had to learn in the first place. While this can and has been equally exhausting, it’s rewarding. Letting go of the responsibility to change others has been a game-changer. I cannot make everyone care, and that has to be okay. Instead of focusing on the “everyone” we talked about at the beginning of this article, I can put my energy into those who have the potential capacity to care deeper. Not only does this alleviate some of the exhaustion, it may reenergize your capacity to live without the mask.

Jess: Speaking through a trans, POC, disabled, library worker frame, there seems to be subcategories of labor nested within the already given labors of our occupation. There is a plurality of labor required of us that is layered.

First, you have a general labor that is expected when performing a service, whatever may be asked of your body to complete the tasks one is expected to do. In addition, there are also the labors of having to perform able-bodiedness consistently while doing these tasks, as well as a labor inscribed by racial capitalism that involves performing a degree of whiteness, which is also bound up with a specific image of acceptability that doesn’t include marginal ways of being.

One could break down these layered categories more specifically, adding labor elements for queer and trans identities, giving nuance to the individual’s situation regarding illness, mobility, or other forms of embodiment. There is an assortment of emotional and physical mechanics required daily that is layered in asking for what we and others need. And in having to ask, there is a burden—and a realization that you were not imagined to occupy that space in its current design. It is the labor of not yet having been imagined.

Nicollette: Jess, DeAnn, Marco, and Mondo, you all have shared so many of the overt things I have thought but also the covert feelings and internal dialogues that I have held within myself. Historically marginalized folks have had to share their stories of pain, suffering, and struggles for liberation. We shouldn’t have to do the emotional, unpaid labor of constantly sharing our harms. Inaccessibility robs us of not just our mental and physical strength but also our time. To echo sentiments from DeAnn and Jess, it is liberatory to release the able-bodied, cis-hetero, white gaze. And, to add on to what Mondo said, buy-in from managers is crucial, but also having disabled people in decision making positions (and paying them adequately and providing them with the proper resources to succeed) is imperative, too. We all navigate the world with a multilayered perspective, and we should be the voices uplifted in the conversation. ✍