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Centering Lived Experience

Library Organizations, Disability, and Equity

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 discusses the need to push our associations and organizations toward greater inclusion of people with disabilities. To do that, it is essential to consistently hear the voices and lived experiences of our colleagues with disabilities—*Dustin Fife, series editor*

Katelyn Quirin Manwiller: In June 2024, ACRL's Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Committee hosted Voices from the Stacks: Lived Experiences of Library Folks with Disabilities, a panel of academic library workers. The recording of the panel is available on ACRL's YouTube page.¹ Unfortunately, our panel did not have time to answer our final question: "How can ACRL improve disability inclusion in the organization or library field at large?" We knew we still wanted to answer this question in some way, and thought an Academic Library Workers in Conversation article would be a great fit. Let's begin with the basis for inclusion in ACRL and the field as a whole: centering disabled voices in conversations about disability inclusion.

Katie Albright: To me, the most important step toward progress is *to listen to disabled folks*. Intentionally cultivate a range of viewpoints from disabled librarians who are doing the work, and more importantly, do not question or disregard their lived experiences.

Sine Hwang Jensen: Exactly, disabled librarians are the experts on our own experiences, and while we each have part of the power to shift the culture of our profession, it is often those with more privilege who are in positions to make broader changes. Following the disability movement saying "Nothing About Us Without Us," ACRL can improve disability inclusion by continuing to make space for disabled perspectives and engaging in advocacy and action. Academic spaces often undervalue experiential knowledge or "What we learn and know from living and dealing with issues that impact our lives."²

Katie: You're right, I often find that in the rush to boost DEI initiatives in libraries and library organizations, the stories and opinions of disabled folks are either left out of the narrative entirely or else they're approximated by a nondisabled person who is imagining what might be helpful or inclusive.

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Dianne Aldrich: Or when there is professional development on disability in the library sector, it has focused heavily on training staff to effectively serve patrons with disabilities. This is essential. However, our panel highlights a recent shift toward addressing the needs of library workers with disabilities themselves.

Katelyn: There has been a big increase in the last few years in library literature about the experience of disabled library workers. This is certainly a shift from the traditional focus of accessibility for patrons that you mention, Dianne. Our field, by and large, has seen accessibility as specific benchmarks based on problems to resolve, not an integral part of equity work.³ Outside of conference proposals submitted by people doing this work, our panel is one of the first times I've seen the lived experience of disabled library workers really represented by ACRL, or even ALA more broadly. As I'm sure you know, there is no dedicated interest group or roundtable to the experience of disability within our field. So, going forward, what else can ACRL do to keep pushing this shift in librarianship to center disabled voices?

Dianne: The organization has a unique opportunity to spearhead this dialogue, fostering a culture where discussions about disability support for library employees are commonplace. By offering training and resources, ACRL can empower library managers to better understand, implement, and advocate for accommodations that benefit their employees with disabilities, ultimately leading to a more inclusive and accessible workplace for all.

Katelyn: Professional development resources provide a great opportunity to intentionally center disabled voices. I've seen conference sessions or webinars focused primarily on the basics of ADA compliance or the HR perspective of handling disability in the workplace. A disabled perspective will often demonstrate about how the ADA is the floor—the bare minimum required by law—not a pinnacle of accessibility we should be aspiring to meet. So, throughout ALA, there needs to be a concerted effort to recruit speakers with lived experience of disability to talk about accessibility and inclusion, like we did for this panel.

Katie: ACRL and our other professional organizations also need to incorporate disability in their planning in order to make actionable changes toward progress. Many times, this will mean significant changes for an organization or institution, which can be both expensive and something seen as an impediment for that particular organization. People do not always embrace change, especially when it's something they might see as affecting only a small segment of the population. I was recently part of a group of disabled librarians who approached the planning committee of an international conference that was centered around accessibility. The conference itself was not inclusive for disabled folks, which was disappointing to all of us. While the organization met with us to cultivate our feedback, ultimately nothing ended up changing, and we are doubtful about future conferences being more accessible. Information without action is simply listening without truly hearing.

Katelyn: So true, Katie. ACRL has been receptive to those structural changes toward accessibility. The ACRL 2021 conference was a mess, but there was a concerted effort around disability inclusion for ACRL 2023. For example, ACRL is maintaining a hybrid model for conferences, which is invaluable for disability inclusion. However, this is far from the norm for library conferences as you saw this past year. As far as I'm aware, ALA has removed almost all virtual elements of the Annual Conference at this point. You can have all the buzzwords you want about equity and accessibility, but you have to intentionally make access to your programming equitable for those words to mean anything.

Sine: That is why it is important to bring attention and change to the larger structures and patterns that continue to marginalize disabled librarians.⁴ We need to focus on creating more inclusive cultures by challenging assumptions and judgments about the “best” or “right” way to work, think, communicate, and be. It is important for all that we normalize taking care of ourselves and to challenge the sense of urgency that comes with much of library work. This means prioritizing the health, morale, and well-being of our colleagues as much as deadlines and productivity. Changing this culture may also mean engaging in creativity and collaboration in coming up with ways where multiple ways of being and communicating are respected and valued, not just in theory but in practice.

Katelyn: You’re right, it is more than just the specifics of programming or conference format, but our profession’s (and society’s) cultural assumptions about the way disability and work in general “should” look. ACRL needs to keep facilitating this sort of conversation to break down those stereotypes and systemic barriers because even if our buildings and conferences are fully accessible, our culture is one of the largest hurdles to improving disability inclusion. ✂

Notes

1. Association of College and Research Libraries, “ACRL Presents: Voices from the Stacks—Lived Experiences of Library Folks with Disabilities,” YouTube video, 1:00:06, June 5, 2024, <https://youtu.be/XpyTXl2oRgA?si=eTXYED0sC9x53HMK>.

2. DataCenter: Research for Justice, *An Introduction to Research Justice* (Oakland, CA: DataCenter Research for Justice, 2015), https://www.powershift.org/sites/default/files/resources/files/Intro_Research_Justice_Toolkit_FINAL1.pdf.

3. A. Gibson, K. Bowen, and D. Hanson, “We Need to Talk about How We Talk about Disability: A Critical Quasi-systematic Review,” *In The Library With The Lead Pipe*, February 24, 2021, <https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2021/disability/>.

4. N. Davis, M. Vaden, M. Seiferle-Valencia, J. Saldaña, and D. Brame, “The Library is NOT for Everyone (Yet): Disability, Accommodations, and Working in Libraries,” *College and Research Libraries News* 85, no. 2 (2024): 58–61, <https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.85.2.58>.