

Toward Inclusive Library Instruction

Guidelines for Integrating Inclusive Practices

Inclusion involves engaging all learners, regardless of their backgrounds, abilities, challenges, or disabilities.¹ As higher education institutions continue to prioritize equity, diversity, and inclusion, academic libraries play a critical role in advancing these values through their instructional practices. By designing learning experiences that are accessible and responsive to diverse needs, libraries can help ensure that all students have equitable opportunities to succeed.

Recent developments in accessibility policy in the United States provide additional impetus for this work and reinforce its broader societal relevance. The US Department of Justice has revised the compliance deadlines for the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Title II web accessibility rule for covered state and local government entities.² Under the revised timeline, entities serving populations of 50,000 or more must comply by April 26, 2027, whereas smaller entities and special district governments have until April 26, 2028. These requirements mandate that covered public entities ensure their websites, web content, and mobile applications conform to the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1 Level AA standards. For libraries, this federal mandate highlights the need to embed accessibility into all aspects of service delivery. Accessibility should not be treated as an afterthought but rather as a foundational element of library services, resources, and learning experiences.

These developments represent more than a compliance obligation; rather they provide an opportunity for libraries to reimagine instruction in ways that are intentionally inclusive, learner centered, and responsive to diverse learning needs. By embracing this moment, libraries can model best practices, promote equitable access, and reaffirm their essential role as champions of student success and academic excellence.

WCAG 2.1, developed by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), defines accessibility through four principles—perceivable, operable, understandable, and robust—and with three levels of conformance—Level A (lowest), Level AA (intermediate), and Level AAA (highest).³ Level AA serves as the standard required under the federal rule. These guidelines inform the design of accessible online learning objects, including PDFs, videos, multimedia, infographics, research guides, slide decks, and interactive tutorials hosted on library websites.⁴ By adhering to WCAG standards, libraries can ensure that instructional materials are accessible to all learners while demonstrating a commitment to inclusive and equitable education.

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Steps Toward Inclusive Library Instruction

Library instruction has evolved beyond traditional one-shot sessions toward more integrated, collaborative, and multimodal teaching approaches. In this context, inclusion must be understood as both a pedagogical commitment and an operational framework.⁵ Instructional materials, delivery methods, and learning environments should be designed to reduce barriers and maximize access for all learners, including students with disabilities, multilingual learners, first-generation students, and those from historically underrepresented backgrounds.

A key framework for achieving this goal is Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which emphasizes providing multiple means of engagement, representation, and action/expression. Applying UDL principles in library instruction encourages flexibility in teaching methods, supports varied learning preferences, and promotes deeper student engagement.⁶ For example, offering content in multiple formats (text, audio, video), incorporating interactive elements, and allowing students different ways to demonstrate learning can significantly enhance accessibility and participation.

Central to this work is the intentional selection and creation of inherently accessible instructional materials. Libraries must ensure that digital resources, research guides, tutorials, and handouts meet accessibility standards, including proper document structure, alt text, captioned media, screen-reader compatibility, and high-contrast visual design.⁷ Print materials and physical learning spaces should also be evaluated through an inclusive lens to ensure equitable access and usability conducive to diverse needs.

Sustaining inclusive instruction requires ongoing assessment and refinement.⁸ Libraries should engage in continuous improvement through usability testing, accessibility audits, and student feedback to identify gaps and implement enhancements. Collaboration with campus partners, including accessibility services, instructional design units, and teaching and learning centers, further strengthens these efforts by integrating interdisciplinary expertise into the design and delivery of library instruction in multiple modalities.

Taken together, these approaches position inclusion as an embedded practice rather than an add-on. Libraries serve as inclusive learning environments that advance student success while modeling accessible, equitable, and culturally responsive teaching.⁹ To achieve lasting impact, a clear set of guidelines is needed, one that advances a multifaceted approach integrating cultural awareness, inclusive programming, targeted diversity initiatives, and continuous evaluation.¹⁰

Guidelines for Inclusive Practices in Library Instruction

To move from principle to practice, library instruction teams can adopt the following guidelines as a flexible approach. These strategies are designed to be adaptable to institutional contexts and scalable across different instructional formats and delivery modalities. The recommendations presented here are grounded in the author's professional experience in library instruction and informed by ongoing informal conversations and practice-based knowledge shared among instructional librarians.

1. Align with Institutional Policies and Strategic Priorities

Library instruction should be informed by a careful review of institutional policies on accessibility, diversity, equity, and inclusion. Library instructional approaches can be intentionally

aligned with these frameworks, supported by locally developed guidelines or toolkits that promote inclusive teaching across in-person, hybrid, and online formats. Inclusive library instruction practices can also enhance the college experience and student success initiatives, including first-year experience programs, retention and progression frameworks, college readiness pathways, developmental education pathways, honors education, and institutional support structures designed to advance student learning and success.

2. Strengthen Engagement with Accessibility and Disability Support Services

Libraries should develop sustained collaborations with campus accessibility and disability support offices to ensure alignment with applicable legal frameworks and current ADA requirements. Such partnerships enable librarians to design instruction that is accessible by default, including lecture plans, learning materials, and assessment approaches. This collaboration also supports proactive identification of accommodation needs and timely instructional adjustments that enhance equitable access for all learners.

3. Integrate Inclusive Instructional Design and Blended Learning Principles

Work closely with instructional designers and e-learning specialists to incorporate UDL principles into instruction. Librarians can implement blended learning approaches such as flipped classroom models, where students review tutorials, videos, database demonstrations, or anticipation guides before instruction sessions. Preclass activities may include comparing search engines and library databases, learning research vocabulary, and exploring research topics in advance. These approaches provide students with multiple pathways to engage with content and support diverse learning preferences.

Another approach is visual instructional strategies that can improve comprehension and engagement for many learners. Librarians should introduce concept-mapping and mind-mapping tools that help students identify broader and narrower topics, related concepts, synonyms, and controlled vocabulary. These visual approaches support research skill development, simplify complex information, and assist multilingual learners in understanding unfamiliar concepts and terminology.

4. Partner with the Center for Excellence in Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship

Libraries can enhance the quality and impact of instruction by engaging with campus resources dedicated to teaching excellence. Participation in faculty development initiatives, instructional workshops, and pedagogical communities provides opportunities to explore emerging teaching practices, refine instructional approaches, and strengthen student-centered learning. These efforts help librarians continuously adapt their teaching to meet the evolving needs of diverse learners.

5. Ensure Compliance of Instructional Technologies and Resources

Evaluate all instructional technologies, databases, software, and digital platforms for accessibility compliance. Libraries must request and review Accessibility Conformance Reports (ACRs) and Voluntary Product Accessibility Templates (VPAT[®])¹¹ from vendors to ensure alignment with Section 508 and WCAG standards.¹² Accessibility considerations should be incorporated into both new procurements and renewal processes.

6. Promote Accessibility as a Core Library Value in E-Resources and Services

Libraries actively demonstrate and promote the accessibility features available within library databases and digital resources. During instruction sessions, librarians highlight built-in artificial intelligence (AI) assistants, translation tools, transcripts for audio and video content, high-contrast display options, text magnification and scaling tools, accessible PDF and HTML formats, alternative text (alt text) for images and figures, captioning features, keyboard navigation support, and audio or text-to-speech functions. These features support multilingual learners, students with disabilities, and individuals with diverse learning preferences. Promoting these tools increases awareness of inclusive resources while advancing equitable access to information.

7. Design-Accessible Instructional Materials and Digital Learning Resources

Accessibility should be integrated into instructional design from the beginning rather than treated as a retroactive addition. This includes readable typefaces, sufficient color contrast, clearly structured content, and alternative text for images and other visual elements. Multimedia resources incorporate captions and transcripts to support multiple modes of access and comprehension, and built-in accessibility tools assist in identifying and addressing design issues.

These principles extend beyond individual documents to the broader ecosystem of library instructional materials, including research guides, tutorials, learning modules, open educational resources (OER), library websites, and digital learning platforms. Applying universal design principles across these formats promotes consistency, usability, and equitable access to learning experiences for all users.

8. Build Inclusive Learning Environments in Physical and Virtual Spaces

Effective learning environments accommodate diverse learner needs through flexibility, usability, and accessibility. In physical instructional spaces, this includes adaptable layouts with movable furniture, height-adjustable workstations, clear visual signage with strong contrast, and emergency information presented in accessible formats.

In digital contexts, learning platforms should prioritize intuitive structure, consistent navigation, and compatibility with assistive technologies to ensure equitable access for all users. Across both settings, instructional spaces should be intentionally designed to support collaborative and participatory learning approaches, including small-group work, peer discussion strategies such as think–pair–share, role-based activities, and other interactive pedagogical methods that promote active engagement.

9. Cultivate Learner-Centered Engagement and Responsive Dialogue

Meaningful learning experiences depend on communication approaches that encourage participation, reduce barriers, and support diverse ways of processing information. Library instructors should present information in a clear, organized, and approachable manner by using concise language, logical content structure, and multiple formats for presenting information. Creating opportunities for learners to share personal preferences related to communication and interaction can help foster a respectful and supportive instructional climate.

Instructional dialogue recognizes that learners require different amounts of time to process information, formulate responses, and engage in discussion. Visual representations,

demonstrations, and alternative explanations further support understanding and participation. Rather than relying solely on yes-or-no comprehension checks, librarians encourage learners to explain concepts in their own words, apply ideas to examples, or demonstrate understanding through active engagement. This approach emphasizes mastery of research skills while acknowledging diverse learning needs.

10. Strengthen Student Success through Cultural Partnerships

Libraries can advance inclusive learning by collaborating with academic departments, student organizations, and global cultural heritage groups in the institution to create educational experiences that reflect diverse perspectives, identities, and knowledge traditions. These partnerships may support workshops, exhibits, discussion forums, film screenings, and instructional programs that promote intercultural understanding and global awareness. Aligning library outreach with cultural heritage celebrations and campuswide diversity initiatives can further increase engagement, enhance the visibility of library resources and services, and foster a stronger sense of belonging among students.

11. Proactively Identify Accessibility Needs and Gather Learners Feedback

Libraries can implement structured processes to identify accessibility requirements prior to instructional sessions. This may include targeted questions in instruction request forms or coordination with faculty to understand student accommodation needs. Another key component involves providing clear, advance information about session activities, learning expectations, and available support options, enabling learners to prepare effectively and engage fully in instruction.

12. Sustain Continuous Improvement, Evaluation, and Innovation in Inclusive Instruction

Inclusive teaching is an evolving practice that depends on ongoing learning, reflective practice, and systematic improvement. Librarians engage in sustained professional development addressing accessibility, inclusive pedagogy, emerging technologies, and research-informed instructional strategies. Regular review processes—such as student usability testing, feedback analysis, accessibility evaluations, and learning outcome assessments—help identify gaps and guide refinements. Integrating evidence-based assessment with iterative innovation enables libraries to continuously enhance instructional quality and better support the success of diverse learners.

Conclusion

The inclusive instruction guidelines provided in this paper highlight a practical roadmap for embedding inclusion into library instruction. By taking a proactive, collaborative, and learner-centered approach, libraries can strengthen instructional practices to better serve all users. As a result, libraries can not only meet compliance requirements but also deepen their role as essential partners in advancing equitable access to knowledge and supporting student success within increasingly diverse academic communities and in broader societal contexts. //

Notes

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