Librarians get passionate about their responsibility to provide equal access to information for all their patrons. Just look at the recent spirited discussion on EASI’s Library Accessibility electronic discussion list (maelstrom.stjohns.edu/archives/axslib-l.html) concerning accessibility problems at the 2005 ALA Annual Conference. Or the full registration for all sessions of the “Designing Web sites for academic libraries” Webcast offered by ACRL in July, September, and October 2005, focusing on usability and accessibility in Web design. But before this, in March 2005, 19 librarians and library assistants from 11 Pennsylvania state universities gathered in Harrisburg to discuss just this topic. Our goal: to brainstorm how best to serve our patrons with disabilities in the both the physical library and on the Web.

Getting organized

The Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE), composed of 14 universities located throughout the commonwealth, serves more than 106,000 students. Each year, PASSHE librarians convene for an annual conference to share information and network. This year, representatives from 11 of the 14 university libraries (one additional library participated through written comments only) met in a roundtable fashion to discuss accommodative services. Attendees ranged from library directors to access services librarians to system administrators. Since the universities often act autonomously, this roundtable discussion served as an opportunity for the librarians to meet, many for the first time, and to take note of how each university fared towards meeting the needs of patrons with disabilities.

The roundtable discussion came about through the efforts of librarians from Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania who were new to their positions. Approached at the reference desk by patrons seeking to use some assistive technology equipment, we experienced some difficulty using the equipment and wanted to improve our own delivery of services to patrons with disabilities. We set out to contact our university’s own office of accommodative services as well as to survey our sister PASSHE libraries. We thought we could draw upon the collective experience and wisdom of the group. A written survey was sent to PASSHE librarians, in which we asked about available assistive technology, staff awareness and training, Web page accessibility, types of disabilities encountered, and library relationships with campus offices of accommodative services. The responses to these surveys served as the basis for the roundtable discussion on
accommodative services held at the annual meeting.

**How do you define a disability?**

One of the first themes to emerge from the discussion revolved around those whom we intended to serve. One library director took issue with the wording of our survey, in which we consistently asked about the students who came into the library. He mentioned that it was important to talk about serving patrons with disabilities, not just students with disabilities, because we all have community members who use the library as well. He also reflected on the question, “How do you define a disability?” While it may be easier to identify a person with a vision or mobility disability, more and more often the library is being called upon to assist those with mental, emotional, or learning disabilities. Such accommodations then veer away from providing purely physical arrangements—computer workstations or accessible entrances—to providing areas for quiet study, tutoring, or extended test-taking. Librarians therefore need to know the regulations for access to the building and other physical accessibility issues, as well as being aware of campuswide policies for test-taking accommodations and for proctoring exams.

**Providing services . . . and support**

We noted that many PASSHE libraries provide a distinct room in which assistive technology equipment is housed. Assistive technology can be defined as anything that makes a task easier to perform,¹ and the equipment provided by our libraries included such things as Zoomtext, JAWS, OpenBook, ReadingEdge, a talking calculator, TTY phone, and a scanner that interacts with this equipment.

The question was raised about whether it was segregation to force the patrons who needed to use this equipment into a separate room. One library reported being required to integrate the equipment into the rest of the library, despite complaints of noise from machines such as a Braille printer. But, as one library director insisted, as long as all patrons are allowed in and are permitted to use the equipment, then having a room designated for this purpose is not segregation. For example, one librarian reported that international students often use the equipment as a way to improve their English. Brightly colored posters on the walls and curtains over internal windows help to draw additional students into these rooms.

On one campus, the office for accommodative services is located in the library. While this arrangement brings more students into the library building, these visits do not necessarily result in the students placing additional demands on library staff. Many of the roundtable participants reported that the students look to their offices of accommodative services rather than to the library for equipment and help. These offices in turn may or may not ask the library to assist the students, depending on the perceived level of receptivity.

One librarian emphasized this point through a story. While preparing for the discussion, he contacted the director of his campus office of accommodative services and received a response of, “Wow! Someone is interested!” He concluded that if such offices perceive a lack of interest, they will not send students to the library. Several librarians reiterated the importance of having one person serving as a bridge to the office of accommodative services. If the staff in these offices know someone in the library is willing to help, then they will refer students to the library.

Again and again throughout the roundtable discussion, the issue was raised of having someone in the library dedicated to helping those with disabilities. Software and an accessible building are good but, ultimately, useless if those who need them fail to come into the building due to ignorance of these accommodations, or even worse—being made to feel uncomfortable.

Several libraries reported having a member of access services in charge of the as-
assistive technology equipment. This person
knows what equipment the library provides
and how to run the equipment. An evening
access supervisor frequently takes over
these responsibilities at night. However,
it was pointed out that there needs to be a
second person with this knowledge, in case
of illness or other absences. One library has
gone so far as to assign librarian liaisons to
different student groups on campus, includ­
ing those with disabilities. The librarians go
out of the library to meet with these groups,
and they mount educational displays in the
library relating to culturally diverse topics.
Having librarian liaisons to student groups
demonstrates both to the students and to
other offices on campus that the library is
dedicated to serving all of its patrons.

Bobby and beyond
In addition to issues of physical accessibility,
the roundtable discussion also addressed
Web accessibility in the state system librar­
ies. One librarian from Bloomsburg report­
ed that the World Wide Web Consortium
estimates that 99 percent of all Web pages
contain some invalid HTML code—which
means that 99 percent of Web pages are
inaccessible to students who rely on as­
istive technology due to visual, auditory,
or physical disabilities. Many librarians at
the discussion responded that considerable
time had been spent evaluating, discussing,
and determining how their library Web sites
could become accessible. Yet, most agreed
that their sites were not fully accessible.

Webster’s Dictionary defines accessibility
as “capable of being reached, being
within reach, easy to speak or deal.” To
apply this definition to Web pages means
that pages would be attainable and no
barriers would exist to prevent use. For
those responsible for library Web pages,
becoming accessible means adhering to
the provisions set forth by Section 508 of
the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).
The act requires “that individuals with dis­
abilities, who are members of the public
seeking information or services from a
federal agency, have access to and use of
information and data that is comparable
to that provided to the public who are
not individuals with disabilities” (www.
section508.gov).

Several methods of making Web pages
accessible were discussed. First, for in­
creased functionality and easier navigation,
Web designers can provide a text-only
page for the site. This creates extra work
for the designers, but the additional effort
ensures that those using screen readers
can access the page and that the page is
ADA-compliant. For those wishing to in­
tegrate accessibility standards with a more
visually appealing site, one of the easiest
methods of doing this is using the alt tag
(<alt>) for all images. This tag will allow
screen readers to read a description of the
image presented on the screen, and one
library Webmaster stated it is part of good
programming and should be incorporated
into a site’s HTML.

Of course, librarians also need to be
concerned with the accessibility of elec­
tronic resources provided through their
Web sites, such as commercially available
databases. While it was noted that EBSCO­
host, which provides the greatest number
of databases to PASSHE libraries, does pro­
vide text-only versions of its databases, it
was also noted that PASSHE’s online public
access catalog requires some modification
for easy use by patrons with visual dis­
abilities. Librarians should include Web
accessibility as a criterion when evaluating
databases and commercial vendors.

The end of the roundtable discussion
allowed for time to give a demonstration
of Bobby. Bobby (www.cast.org/bobby) is
a Web site that flags areas of a Web page
that may need to be changed for greater
accessibility. It will highlight such things
as missing alt tags. Of course, Bobby is
not foolproof. As pointed out, having a
text-only page makes the Web page ADA­
compliant, but Bobby does not report the
presence of a text-only page. While Bobby
serves as a great tool for making library
Web pages more accessible, librarians should not rely solely upon this software.

**Reaching out**

The roundtable discussion raised many issues and questions that could not be answered in one hour. We discussed the copyright implications of making audio recordings of a textbook for an auditory learner, as well as various training workshops that were available on the different campuses. Because of the high number of participants, time was a factor, and the number of discussion topics had to be limited.

Despite the different resources and services provided by the PASSHE libraries, the discussion reaffirmed that access to information, regardless of format, is key for the library. Resources exist for proactive librarians seeking to serve all their patrons, including campus accommodative services offices, the Bobby Web site, and sister institutions. Taking that step to educate ourselves on what is available and to make others aware we are doing so lets everyone know that, yes, the library is interested in serving them.

**Where do we go from here?**

The Bloomsburg librarians have recently begun a blog as a way of communicating with their sister school librarians. The answers to the written questionnaire and a summary of the roundtable discussion may be found there, as well as a number of posts detailing some useful resources. We hope the blog promotes awareness of accommodative services in libraries beyond the boundaries of PASSHE, particularly for new librarians. We welcome your participation.

**Notes**

3. The Bloomsburg librarians’ blog can be found at pa-sshelco-als.blogspot.com/.