Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Analysis of Library School Syllabi Reveals Poor Design and Limited Content about Disability and Accessibility

Pionke, J. (2023). What are library graduate students learning about disability and accessibility? A syllabus analysis. Urban Library Journal, 29(1). https://academicworks.cuny.edu/ulj/vol29/iss1/2/

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Article abstract

Objective – To analyze the disability and accessibility content of library sciences courses. As well as to determine the importance of teaching students about this topic throughout programs covered in the study.

Design – Qualitative study involving the data analysis of syllabi.

Setting – Selected library graduate school curriculum programs in the United States.

Subjects – In total, 77 syllabi drawn from 49 institutions taken from the American Library Association listing of accredited library school graduate programs.

Methods – The author used keyword searches to identify courses offered between 2017–2020 that contained content on disability and accessibility. Syllabi were available for 77 of the 145 identified courses. The author analyzed the sample set (n=77) for both content and structure.

Main Results – Poor citation structure, disability accommodation statements, assessment, and a focus on digital accessibility were among the main findings highlighted. The author identified four major categories to explain and understand the content found on the syllabi; these descriptors were further broken down into sub-categories to explain the findings of each topic content area. Highlights of the results are:

(1) disability and accessibility topics and all related terms were ranked according to number of times they appeared, e.g. digital content, usability, web/internet, coding (22); instruction and information literacy (16); and specific demographics etc. (10);

(2) the organization and sequencing of when course content was presented - at the beginning, middle and end of the semester;

(3) citation currency– Two hundred syllabi were analyzed. One hundred and forty-one syllabi had fairly current citation dates falling between 2009-2018. Forty-eight had no dates and eleven had dates that were outdated (2008 or earlier);

(4) assignments – which measured the learning outcome of the said topic were reported in the following way: nothing assigned (67); 1 or more assignments (11); undetermined (3).

Conclusion –The study underlies that a well-crafted syllabus effectively communicates the goals of the course – the importance of the topic structure about disability and accessibility in library schools' curricula. The author identified numerous design flaws that impact how the content relays information about the course's pedagogy. The data suggest the need for the following improvements on the syllabi: professional topic presentation, variety of formats in texts and materials and their access, citation currency and poor structure, assignments and organization sequencing of course content, a number of assessment focused observations on vague assignments or lack of examples provided, and the inclusion of disability statements. Some of the higher order concerns were: the ableist language contained, outdated language, and the lack of stated university-related disability resources for students. All of the aforementioned present an accessibility barrier for disabled students and may affect the general perception about the topic. The author recommends that stronger guidelines for LIS educators would be advantageous to students, encourage disability awareness and the best DEI practices. Further to this, libraries should implement and adapt a strategic plan that would help overcome accessibility barriers for patron delivery services. There must be an increased emphasis on teaching about accessibility that expands beyond forms of digital media. Providing equitable library services in all areas for the disabled populations in the physical library spaces is needed.

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Evidence Summary

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Abstract

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Commentary

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) marked its thirtieth anniversary in 2020. The timing of the author's publication is well placed, as it centers disability and accessibility curriculum needs within the LIS field and, the related research from library employees' perspectives expands upon this (Pionke, 2020a, 2020b). Similarly, Cooke and Jacobs (2018) analyzed syllabi using a diversity audit conducted by LIS students. The recommended pedagogical framework of the study addresses inclusion barriers encountered by LIS students.

Adapting Russell and Gregory's research study evaluation guidelines (2003) in tandem with utilizing Glynn's Critical Appraisal (2006), the study meets commonly accepted standards. Thematic analysis was an appropriate research method to collect disability and accessibility data from the syllabi content. The patterns uncovered excluded other plausible explanations, confirming the overall validity of the study. The research question was clear and adequately substantiated, with highlighted syllabi design failures impacting LIS students. A cognizant and balanced approach to integrating web/digital and other accessible usable formats, and resources, to communicate an inclusive course. Future

professionals may translate learning into practice as the data derived expands their DEI core competency engagement skills. Disability accommodation statements are adequately discussed under a separate category as these policies are reflective of institutions' commitment to DEI. Syllabi are the compendium of course information and their design should be student-focused for effective communication. Several of the article's recommendations for LIS programs include: consistently using proper citations and standardized disability accommodation language, availability of fully accessible materials, and more diverse topics, to improve the student experience.

Since one author developed the codes, the probability of imprecision is higher and there may be some challenges due to differences in academic programs which may affect the reproducibility of the study. Also, the findings are closely connected to the author's interpretation of the patterns. The broad applicability of the keyword searched analysis across the sample syllabi (n=77), representing forty-nine institutions, did not consider: the various specializations amongst LIS degree programs, information about the modality of the courses (this is important because the author noted that most syllabi prioritized digital accessibility) or, school location (some states have implemented laws that enhance federal protections of the ADA). Thus, additional policies must be implemented by schools in those states to protect the civil liberties of disabled students. The author purports a more inclusive view of DEI, and data that embraces the perspective of faculty and staff in the college library community due to their disability status would have been a welcomed addition. Their lived experiences would be invaluable in developing best practices.

This study has identified important areas about the intersection of DEI and LIS practices relevant to students gaining "real-world" experiences as they engage in and carry forward inclusive practices. An area of further study would be the free-text unique responses of student experiences. The ableist perspective highlighted, serves to pioneer new understanding in disability and accessibility access. LIS programs with a concerted commitment to improving DEI aspirational goals will find this study beneficial in demonstrating those values to current and prospective students.

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