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Are Library and Information Science Educators Teaching Accessibility? Content Analysis of Syllabi

Kevin J. Mallery
Old Dominion University, kmallery@odu.edu

Rea N. Simons
Old Dominion University, rsimons@odu.edu

Clayton A. Copeland
University of South Carolina

Jackie Nikiema
Old Dominion University, jniki001@odu.edu

Evan J. Dorman
Old Dominion University, edorm001@odu.edu

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Accessibility and Ability in LIS Curricula and Pedagogy: Sharing Lessons Learned

Rea N. Simons^a, Kevin J. Mallary^a, Clayton A. Copeland^b, Mirah J. Dow^c, Evan J. Dorman^a, and
Brandy N. Fox^b

^aOld Dominion University, USA

^bThe University of South Carolina, USA

^cEmporia State University, USA

rsimons@odu.edu, kmallary@odu.edu, copelan2@email.sc.edu, mdow@emporia.edu,
edorm001@odu.edu, bnfox@email.sc.edu

ABSTRACT

In recent years, library and information science (LIS) academic programs have been working to address systemic bias within the field and to improve their coverage of issues related to diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility, and justice (DEIAJ). While accessibility is a core part of DEIAJ considerations and the American Library Association values (ALA, 2019), it is rarely considered central to curriculum and accessibility and disability are seldom covered in graduate LIS courses (Alajmi & Alshammari, 2020; Ren et al., 2022).

The lack of LIS curricular content addressing accessibility and serving disabled patrons mirrors the struggles of LIS practitioners to address those issues (Dow & Bushman, 2020; Potnis & Mallary, 2021). For example, previous research argues that librarians should understand Web accessibility to provide equitable access to digital resources (e.g., digital libraries, LibGuides, and websites) for disabled patrons (Mulliken & Djenmo, 2017). However, LIS graduates and practicing librarians report feeling uncomfortable with creating accessible Web pages and LibGuides (Pionke, 2021). Similarly, while previous research indicates that graduates must learn to engage with disabled patrons to elicit their accessibility needs (Copeland, 2012; Copeland, 2023; Gibson et al., 2021) and that empathy training helps practicing librarians better engage disabled patrons (Pionke, 2021), few LIS programs integrate such training into their curricula.

Unfortunately, LIS faculty may feel under-supported or unprepared to address this content in program curricula or their individual courses. Research in related fields indicates that faculty have concerns about unfamiliarity with the content (Guedes & Landoni, 2020), insufficient time or institutional support (Kawas et al., 2019), and a lack of program- and field-level learning objectives (Shinohara et al., 2018). While little research specifically explores LIS educators' experiences teaching accessibility principles and practices, previous work indicates that faculty may feel unprepared to teach topics such as accessible Web design (Mulliken & Djenmo, 2017).

Despite the lack of research on LIS faculty experiences with teaching accessibility-related content, some best practices and impacts of including this content have been shared. Examples include teaching LIS students how adopting Universal Design for Learning can create

accessible and inclusive training (Lewitzky & Weaver, 2022) and how evaluating and designing accessible digital resources can improve disabled patrons' experiences using library services (Mulliken, 2016). Integrating accessibility content within a service-learning framework can help students become even more attuned to disabled patrons' accessibility needs and show students how to co-create inclusive library and information spaces (Copeland, 2019).

LIS faculty must better equip graduates to serve disabled patrons while modeling accessible pedagogy. Additionally, collaboration between LIS faculty and students in addressing these topics is necessary to achieve equity in the field. Given that this topic deserves more time beyond this session, the panel aims to facilitate a timely, worthwhile conversation with LIS educators and students about information behaviors and practices in accessible LIS learning experiences, as well as building and facilitating an ongoing accessibility community of practice.

PANEL FORMAT

The panel will comprise two 45-minute sections, with the first section addressing accessibility concerns and the second section modeling instructional design strategies. Each section will begin with the moderator asking panelists questions to prompt discussion. Questions will include topics on how LIS curricula can prepare students to address disability and accessibility issues and tools, as well as on how faculty can ensure accessible learning environments. Panelists will ensure that both faculty and student perspectives are represented (10 minutes).

Next, each panelist will lead a breakout group in discussing questions raised (20 minutes). Panelists will reconvene and report back, with the moderator synthesizing connections made (10 minutes). Five minutes will be allotted for introductions, and another five minutes for an intermission between sections.

During each breakout discussion, panelists will gather contact details from participants interested in building a community of practice dedicated to integrating accessibility in LIS education. As a first step toward developing this community, panelists will establish a ListServ using interested participants' email addresses. Next steps will be shared with ListServ recipients.

PANELISTS

Rea Simons (Moderator)

Rea Simons is an Assistant Professor in Library & Information Studies at Old Dominion University (ODU). Their research focuses on using technology to foster inclusive communities and on advancing DEIAJ within LIS education and practice. They have developed and taught LIS courses integrating accessibility for the past seven years, at multiple institutions.

Kevin Mallery

Kevin Mallery is an Assistant Professor in LIS at ODU. His research examines the delivery of accessible library and information services for disabled patrons and the adoption of Universal Design for Learning in LIS education. He has over a decade of experience teaching students from the communication and LIS fields to address accessibility barriers.

Clayton Copeland

Clayton Copeland is a full-time faculty member and Director of the Laboratory for Leadership in Equity and Diversity, School of Information Science at the University of South Carolina (USC). She specializes in information access and accessibility for populations with

disabilities. She brings over sixteen years of experience with research and teaching in equity of access and disability, and works as a professional accessibility consultant, and committee work with the National Library for the Blind and Print Disabled.

Mirah Dow

Mirah Dow is a Professor in the School of Library and Information Management at Emporia State University. Her LIS teaching, research, and advocacy promoting accessibility in LIS programs and professional library positions is influenced by research and training at Emporia State University, The University of North Carolina (UNC), TEACCH® Autism Program, UNC School of Medicine and The University of Kansas, Beach Center on Disabilities.

Evan Dorman

Evan Dorman is a first-year student in ODU's MLIS program. His coursework on collections development and the professional responsibilities of librarianship has taught him the importance of making digital and physical library spaces welcoming for patrons of all abilities.

Brandy Fox

Brandy Fox is an MLIS candidate at USC. She has completed a certificate in DEI and is pursuing an additional certificate in Grant Writing and Development. She is in the process of starting a non-profit devoted to reducing wait times and other accessibility barriers faced by students who require course materials in audio format.

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ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

information services; curriculum; pedagogy; social justice; library technology systems

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

accessibility; disability; diversity, equity, and inclusion

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