# Ensuring Inclusivity: Questions to Guide the Creation and Evaluation of Library Accessibility Policies

Carli Spina and Colleen Lougen

## Abstract

This article presents an accessibility questionnaire designed to assist library leadership teams in identifying barriers to accessibility. It outlines necessary features to consider for your library and supports strategic planning for developing or revising your accessibility policy and website and can be a jumping off point for creating a customized questionnaire for your institution. The goal is to improve access to information about resources, services, and facilities for users with disabilities. This process will enhance documentation and encourage meaningful planning and outreach, fostering a more welcoming and inclusive environment.

## Why Is Public Accessibility Important?

Libraries should place a high priority on accessibility for people with disabilities. In addition to complying with the legal requirements of the American Disabilities Act (ADA), libraries have a moral responsibility to create an inclusive environment for a significant portion of the population (Americans with Disabilities Act 1990). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that approximately 27% of adults in the United States have some form of disability (CDC March 13, 2024). With such a large percentage of the population experiencing some form of disability, it is evident that a significant number of library patrons and employees are likely to have accessibility needs. For this reason, sharing accessibility information should be a top priority for library leadership to ensure the library remains an inclusive and welcoming part of the community.

## Accessibility Policies

Keeping library policies and statements up-to-date and reviewing the language regularly is critical for continuous improvement. The library's accessibility policy may range from a general statement describing its commitment to accessibility to a detailed web page listing accessibility

features of collections, spaces, and services (Vaughan and Warlick 2020). For the policy to be effective, there should be clear procedures for reporting problems and seeking assistance. In addition to facilitating communication with patrons, this will ensure transparency and accountability (Spina 2019).

## Accessibility Web Pages

Accessibility web pages are often created by libraries to assist users with disabilities in accessing their resources, services, and facilities (Brunskill 2020, 939). Providing an accessibility web page is crucial to creating a welcoming and accommodating environment (Power and LeBeau 2009, 64). If no web page is in place, it is generally presumed that the library does not provide such services (Power and LeBeau 2009, 60). When interviewing a group of "functionally diverse patrons at a single large research university in the 2015 fall semester with a focus on people who are visually impaired, mobility impaired, autistic, or have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)," J. J. Pionke found that "[a] major emergent theme was that patrons asked for resources or services that already exist and may have existed for quite some time" (Pionke 2017, 50, 53-4), which underscores the importance of clear information about available services.

This is particularly true because it has been shown that people with disabilities may feel uncomfortable asking for assistance when there is no public accessibility information and language on the website (Bodhagi, Cheong, and Zainab 2016, 91). This documentation can enhance library services by providing easy access to information for patrons and staff, as well as allowing managers to identify deficient areas that need improvement (Brunskill 2020, 948). However, developing a "robust" accessibility web page requires significant time and effort (Frank 2023, 60). Unfortunately, many library websites don't provide enough information about accessibility, creating a disparity between what the library offers and what is displayed on the accessibility page (Brunskill 2020; Vaughan and Warlick 2020).

## Customizing Language for Your Library

While model policies and best practices can help in the creation of meaningful accessibility policy language and other documentation for any library, a key element of ensuring the impact of this work is to customize the information for the specific features of an individual library. Pionke's study (2017) underscores a point that will likely resonate with many librarians around the difficulty of conducting outreach to patrons and, particularly when combined with Power and Lebeau's findings of reluctance to ask questions (2009), points to the importance of making sure

that the accessibility information on a library's website is specific and thorough enough that patrons are clear on what is available to meet their needs. This process can be difficult initially, but tools such as the questionnaire (see Appendix A), originally developed by the authors as part of our work with the SUNY Library Accessibility Cohort, can serve as a guide in the process. The key to the development of this language is to systematically consider the accessibility of all aspects of the library's spaces, services, and collections. For library leadership teams interested in undertaking a systematic review of a library's accessibility barriers and features to create documentation, this questionnaire can offer a shared understanding of important features to consider and a way to organize and manage this work across multiple areas of the library. To this end, the questionnaire is divided into categories and, within each category, offers broad, open-ended questions that can help to structure a review of the library's offerings and ensure that no relevant information is overlooked. These categories can facilitate assigning responsibility for different sections of the questionnaire to particular departments within the library or the entire review can be undertaken by a single individual or team.

The questionnaire is intended to be used as a starting point for determining the information to be included in the policy language or accessibility documentation shared by the library. However, it is only a first step for determining the specific information to share. Each question would need additional descriptive language to ensure that patrons have sufficient information to understand what the library offers and to support employees using this information to answer patron questions. For example, in addition to simply listing specialized materials available at the library, such as Braille books or assistive devices, the customized information should also include relevant information about where these materials are in the library and any loan policies or restrictions. For some libraries, particularly those working with specialized collections or communities, there may be a need to add to or modify the questionnaire to meet local needs.

It is important to note that answering these questions honestly will likely result in some questions that are answered in the negative. It is rare for libraries to have every accessibility feature, and some aspects may not be possible for a library to provide. However, it is just as critical to share information about known barriers or limitations of the library's offerings, as it is to share information about the accessibility features of the library. Knowing about barriers in advance allows patrons to plan their visit, which may mean reaching out to the library about possible accommodations or altering their plan to avoid these barriers.

Once customized language has been developed, it is important to share this information in a way that is accessible and user-friendly. In her interviews with students with disabilities,

Brunskill found that a quarter of the students would use Google to search for library accessibility information and one additional respondent mentioned using the search feature on the library's website (2020, 774). In addition, a third of the interviewed students mentioned that they would look for a link to the information at the bottom of the library's website (Brunskill 2020, 774). For this reason, it is essential to ensure that the content will be findable in all of these ways. The information should be on the library's website on a page designed to meet web accessibility standards and that it is easy to find from the library's homepage via searching or links. Once the content is on the website, it is also crucial to test that the keywords and page structure will make it a top result when patrons use a search engine to look for accessibility information about the library. The questionnaire can also help with this process, since the questions include some common keywords that might be used when searching for information.

## Moving Beyond Accessibility Policies

This questionnaire is designed to guide the process of writing accessibility documentation. Furthermore, it can help with other aspects of accessibility work, including evaluating existing services and planning for future improvements, as well as assessing the professional development needs of the library's employees. Both of these are necessary tasks for library management that can help to set a library on a path towards maximum accessibility.

### Evaluating Existing Services & Planning for Improvements

Understanding a library's current level of accessibility is as important as sharing accessibility information with the community; this questionnaire can aid in this effort. Because it is designed to include questions on topics that apply to a broad range of spaces and services a library can offer to improve accessibility and inclusion, this questionnaire can also be used to evaluate existing features and prompt ideas for future improvement. With questions about specific features, libraries can use negative responses about features that are missing to fuel new ideas for the future. Using this questionnaire, for example, may reveal that a library has very few large print books, which could be a focus for future collection development efforts. In cases where the questionnaire indicates significant barriers, such as sections of the collection that are inaccessible, the library leadership will receive advanced notice. This will allow them to plan for accommodations or redesign the space to minimize the barrier.

At many libraries, accessibility improvements require long-term planning to ensure the necessary funding and time is available to make meaningful change. For this reason, integrating accessibility into long-term budgets and strategic plans is crucial, and tracking desired features, even if they are not currently possible, is a key element of this process. Developing a list of

future avenues for greater accessibility can help to ensure that these projects are considered when funding becomes available, or complementary projects could incorporate accessibility into a larger initiative. For leadership teams that are undertaking strategic planning or fundraising initiatives, this questionnaire can provide structure around efforts to improve accessibility and help track the impact of these efforts as answers to specific questions change over time.

Libraries can even plan regular evaluative reviews to ensure that accessible features still function as intended and meet community needs. This can be particularly helpful for features that might be easy to overlook, such as automated doors. A broken door may not immediately be noticed if most users open it manually rather than relying on automated push-button access.

## Employee Training

This questionnaire can also serve as a valuable tool for managers developing an employee training plan that improves services for patrons with disabilities. Employee training around accessibility is an ongoing challenge for libraries. A 2018 survey of ARL libraries found that only 20% of respondents allocated an annual budget towards professional development on accessibility topics (Spina and Cohen, 4). This is not due to library employees' confidence around accessibility topics. In fact, survey data has demonstrated that among library graduate students, "only 7% felt extremely well or very well prepared to assist patrons with disabilities" and "only 15% ... felt that they had been extremely well or very well prepared to address accessibility issues" (Pionke 2020a, 258–59). Among currently employed library employees, slightly over 63% were not comfortable with "troubleshooting assistive technology software" (Pionke 2020b, 4). Moreover, there is a clear indication that both library graduate students and current library employees have a strong interest in further accessibility training to improve their skills in this area (Pionke 2021, 417). Despite this evidence that more accessibility training is wanted and needed in libraries, it can be difficult to determine where to focus this training.

Using this questionnaire, library leadership can determine which aspects of accessibility are most relevant at an individual library and begin the process of evaluating existing knowledge in these core areas. For libraries that provide access to specific assistive technologies, there may be greater need to provide in-depth training on working with those tools, whereas, for libraries that have extensive policies, it might be more relevant to offer training on how these policies are applied and when exceptions may be made. The very process of using the questionnaire to draft accessibility documentation can, therefore, serve as the first step towards developing a professional development plan to suit the needs of a specific library team. Using the same categories and questions in the questionnaire can guide the evaluation of where library

employees may need additional training and support to understand how to support patrons with disabilities using the library. Much of this need is likely to be around specific assistive technologies that are available at the library, but there are other areas that might require training as well, such as understanding policies, knowing how to use specific tools, such as a hearing loop or wheelchair lift, and gaining comfort around appropriate and inclusive means of communication.

## Conclusion

A key element of library leadership is to devote the necessary time and resources to ensure that the library and its employees are prepared to welcome and provide equitable services to patrons with disabilities in the same manner as other members of the community. This questionnaire can help to understand where a library is currently at concerning accessibility, guide the process of sharing this information clearly with community members, and help to determine future goals and plans around accessibility.

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## Appendix: Library Accessibility Questionnaire

This questionnaire is intended to serve as a guide when creating accessibility policy language or other online accessibility information for a library. Not all items may be relevant for all libraries and there may be other important factors to consider at specific libraries, but asking these questions will help determine what information should be included in publicly available accessibility guidance.

**Space**
- Where are the accessible entrances to the library? Which entrances are not accessible?
- Is accessible parking available near the library? Where is it located?
- Is the library near accessible public transportation? What route should patrons use to get from the public transportation to the library?
- Are the restrooms accessible? If only some are, where are they located? If none are, where is the closest accessible restroom? What specific accessibility features do the restrooms have? Such as:
  - Wide stalls to accommodate wheelchairs and mobility devices?
  - Grab bars?
  - Adult changing station?
  - Children's changing station?

- - Accessible height sinks?
    - Motion activated sinks?
    - Automated doors?
  - Does the library have one or more accessible drinking fountains or water stations?
  - If the library covers multiple floors, does it have an elevator? If not, is there a wheelchair lift? If yes to either of these, can patrons use it without mediation? If yes, is an accommodation or any special access required (i.e., a key, swipe card access, etc.)?
  - Are there spaces in the library that are not accessible? If yes, how can patrons access collections, equipment, or other items in those spaces?
  - Are there quiet study spaces in the library?
  - Are there low light areas of the library?
  - Are there scent and/or allergen free spaces in the library?
  - Are there spaces with specific assistive technologies?
  - Does the library offer a variety of seating options and table heights?
  - Are there adjustable height tables or workstations available?
  - For all features, does the language make it clear where they are located?

**Navigation & Wayfinding**
  - Does the library have Braille or otherwise tactile signage?
  - Does the library have an accessible map available on the website?
  - Does the library have a tactile map of library spaces available?
  - Does the library offer orientations, tours, or other support for disabled patrons who need assistance navigating the space?

**Services**
  - Are service points accessible? For example:
    - Do service desks have multiple heights available?
    - Do service points have sound amplification?
    - Are service point employees prepared to assist and communicate with patrons with a range of disabilities?
  - Are there additional services or specialized supports available for patrons with disabilities? Such as:
    - Help with assistive technology
    - Retrieval of materials from the shelf
    - Home delivery of resources
    - Curbside pick-up of resources
    - Format conversion, such as scanning print materials
    - Assistance with inaccessible electronic resources
    - Proxy borrowing options

**Collection Accessibility**
  - Does the library collect accessible formats, such as large print and Braille?
  - Does the library collect audiobooks or talking books?

- Does the library review electronic resources for accessibility prior to purchase? If so, what standards are used for the review? What steps are taken when an electronic resource is not fully accessible?
- What options does the library offer to assist with inaccessible materials in the collection (i.e., scanning items, providing assistance with inaccessible databases, etc.)?
- Do any library databases have specific accessibility features that can be highlighted?
- How can users find accessible materials?

**Digital Accessibility**
- Does the library conduct regular web accessibility reviews?
- Does the library comply with a specific level of web accessibility (i.e., WCAG 2.2 Level AA)?
- Are third-party tools that are integrated into the library website tested for accessibility?
- Are online documents structured for accessibility? Have they gone through automated or manual accessibility reviews?
- Are online documents available in multiple file formats?
- Are there opportunities for disabled patrons to participate in user testing?
- Is the library's social media presence accessible?

**Assistive Technologies in Library**
- Are mobility aids available in the library? Such as
  - Wheelchair
  - Motorized scooter
  - Walker
  - Cane
  - Crutches
- Are screen readers available in the library?
- Is there a screen magnifier on any of the library computers?
- Is there a book/print magnifier or a magnifying glass available?
- Is ergonomic and/or adaptive computer equipment available? Such as
  - Ergonomic keyboards
  - Large-print keyboards
  - Specialized mice
  - Switches
  - Refreshable Braille displays
  - Braille printers

**Items for Check Out**
- Are there circulating items that may be helpful for disabled patrons?
  - Headphones (especially noise canceling headphones)
  - Laptops/tablets with screen readers
  - Attention supports (i.e., fidget spinners, etc.)
  - Specialized lights
  - Ergonomic computer mouse

- ○ Ergonomic keyboard
- ○ Adaptive controls (i.e., switches, etc.)
- Are there circulating assistive tools?
  - ○ Wheelchairs or other mobility devices
  - ○ Specialized lighting
  - ○ Refreshable Braille displays
  - ○ Braille inputs and/or printers

**Accommodations/Permissions**
- Is information about eligibility for accommodations included?
- Are instructions for requesting accommodations included?

**Events**
- Is the library's event space and seating physically accessible?
- Are virtual events captioned?
- Can ASL interpretation be requested for events? If so, when, how, and what are the requirements for such a request?
- Does the library's event space have a hearing loop?
- Does the library's event registration process offer an option to request accommodations?
- Are events recorded for asynchronous viewing?

**Policies**
- Are any potentially relevant policies mentioned or linked to? For example:
  - ○ Sound policies
  - ○ Service animal policies
  - ○ Emotional support animal policies (note: service animals and emotional support animals are treated differently under many legal standards and institutional policies)
  - ○ Food policies
  - ○ Allergen/Scent policies
  - ○ Home delivery policies
  - ○ Collection development policies
  - ○ Policies regarding proxy borrower options/access for assistants
- Is a link provided to institution-wide accessibility policy language?
- Is there a mechanism for flexibility in the application of library policies to meet diverse needs?

**Contact Information**
- Is there contact information provided for those who wish to get in touch with the library?
- Is an individual listed as the contact person for accessibility questions, feedback, or concerns? If yes, is there a plan for when that person is away from the library?
- Is contact information provided for other disability and accessibility services at the institution?

- Does the policy include links to external partner organizations, such as local nonprofits or available accessibility services and supports, if relevant?
- Does the policy include the most recent date of update so that patrons can know how current the information is?

**Overarching Considerations**
- Are library outreach and marketing materials designed to maximize accessibility?
- Is there information about the training that library employees receive related to disability and accessibility topics?
- Are any accessibility issues or known barriers addressed directly and described clearly?
- Is the language used in the policy/information inclusive and welcoming?
- Is the policy/information written in a clear and direct manner that will be easily understood by a wide range of users?
- Is this accessibility policy/information easily accessible via the library's homepage?
- Is the accessibility policy/information integrated into the website menu?
- Is the content findable using a search engine such as Google?
- Is the webpage featuring this accessibility policy/information compliant with web accessibility standards and best practices?
- If there are multiple branches or related libraries, is each library clearly and separately included in the policy/information?
- Is there a workflow for regularly reviewing and updating this information?
- Is there a plan for collecting feedback from individuals with disabilities and incorporating that feedback into future iterations of this language and/or future changes at the library?

**Carli Spina** (carli.spina@gmail.com) is Head of Research & Instructional Services at SUNY Fashion Institute of Technology. **Colleen Lougen** (lougenc@newpaltz.edu) is Serials and Electronic Resources Librarian at SUNY New Paltz.