Disability Representation in Population & Curricula in the MLIS Program

The 2023 Standards were adopted by the American Library Association (ALA) on November 30, 2023 and infuses concepts of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) throughout the standards (American Library Association, n.d.). Although the UBC iSchool will not be held to these Standards in its upcoming comprehensive review in 2024, this briefing argues that future **plans for student acceptance into the MLIS program and curricular development should bear in mind that "there often is a disconnect between what is being taught, what is being learned, and what is needed" with regards to disability and accessibility in academia** (Pionke, 2020, p. 254).

Summary

- **Disability should be understood on a systemic level** rather than the individual level
- **Recognize students, faculty, and existing information professionals can be disabled**
- Disabled people are underrepresented in this industry
- Accommodations are fraught with risk
- Accessibility should be considered in planning and design, not as an afterthought
- **"Nothing about us without us"**: understand this work is an ongoing negotiation and collaboration

Next Steps

1. Engage existing students, faculty, and information professionals to understand barriers and needs that can be addressed in graduate school, such as understandings and attitudes towards disability.

2. Include practical elements of accessibility into core and elective curricula that is not limited to voluntary experiential learning and considers disabilities that may be invisible.

3. Create incentives and environments conducive for disabled people to be students at the iSchool, including hiring more disabled faculty and offering flexible course schedules.

Stakeholders

UBC iSchool	MLIS Students	Disabled Library Workers
• A little over 13% of Academic Librarians are from UBC (Canadian Association of Professional Academic Librarians CAPAL Advocacy Committee, 2019) • Higher education is rooted in ableist perspectives, practices, and assumptions about faculty and students (Moeller, 2019)	• Disabled students' abilities as information professionals are being questioned while they are still in school (Siraki, 2021) • Students leave graduate programs feeling underprepared to serve disabled patrons (Pionke, 2020) • Students themselves are actively creating networks to fill the perceived void. (Pionke, 2020, p. 254)	• Lack of inclusion affects both patrons and employees (Pionke, 2020) • Individuals are overburdened with "[being on] every initiative and committee, they do not have adequate mentors, their work is devalued because it is diverse, and so on" (Pionke, 2020, p. 265)

Defining Disability

Existing institutional definitions of disability are ableist (i.e., based on the cultural assumption that everyone is able-bodied; Oud, 2019, p. 177) and create a deficit view of disabled people. This briefing instead takes on the social model of disability popular in critical disability studies, where **disability is a "social and cultural construct, created when someone encounters a barrier in their environment that makes it difficult for them to function 'normally'"** (Oud, 2019, p. 173).

Why Disability?

"Hiring and retaining diverse individuals in library graduate programs matters because representation matters."
(Pionke, 2020, p. 266)

Most conversations in Library and Information Studies (LIS) relate to racialized libraries, and disability is often overlooked (Giles-Smith & Popowich, 2023). Additionally, as UBC is publicly funded, it must adhere to the 2019 Accessible Canada Act, which "encourages organizations to demonstrate that they have removed barriers to accessibility, including attitudinal and employment barriers (Giles-Smith & Popowich, 2023, p. 3). **Kumbier and Starkey advocate against the "'tick-box' framework" that treats access or disability issues as individualized problems rather than systemic inequalities** (2016).

Statistics
- 89.62% of respondents to the 2018 Census of Canadian Academic Librarians identified as white only; similarly, in 2017, 86.7% of respondents to an ALA survey indicated they were white (Rosa & Henke, 2017 cited in Pionke, 2020)
- The World Health Organization estimates 16% of global population worldwide is disabled (2022)
  - **6.02% of academic librarians identified as having a disability**, including invisible disabilities such as learning disabilities, anxiety, depression, and type 1 diabetes, in the 2018 Census of Canadian Academic Librarians
  - Only 2.91% of respondents of the ALA survey above identified with having a disability
- 10.1% more disabled workers were represented compared to the labour force at Canadian Association of Research Libraries members
- 22.2% of recent LIS graduates believed their degree programme offered diversity-related options (Mestre 2010 cited in Alajmi and Alshammari, 2020)

Disability and accessibility content is rarely part of core curricula and is typically found in elective courses (Alajmi & Alshammari, 2020; Ren et al., 2022; Simons et al., 2023). One student in an MLIS program noted: "The education I have received about accessibility […] depended on the knowledge of the students and faculty around me. It was not integrated in the LIS curriculum." (Pionke, 2020, p. 261). Additionally, marginalized students are found to "prefer to attend institutions where they see themselves and their lived experiences embodied in the curriculum" (Alajmi & Alshammari, 2020, p. 111).

"Generally supportive attitudes do not translate into equity[…] without an understanding of disability-specific issues in the workplace and specific efforts to address them through workplace policies and structures." (Oud, 2019)

Existing Trends

LIS literature, education, and attitudes largely frame the discussion of disability as a phenomenon limited to patrons to be assisted and accommodated, not the lived experience of existing and incoming information professionals (Davis et al., 2024; Giles-Smith & Popowich, 2023; Moeller, 2019). Moeller (2019) asserts that universities in particular are "neither designed nor constructed to acknowledge the possibility of anyone with disabilities, except as necessary to remain in compliance with legal mandates" (p. 458). **There is a noted gap between those who need accommodations and those who actually seek them out** (Giles-Smith & Popowich, 2023; Manwiller et al., 2023; Oud, 2018, 2019).

Disclosure: Risk Management and Access to Accommodations

Disclosure is generally avoided unless it is necessary for job duties, and even then, it may be limited to colleagues one works with regularly, director supervisors, and HR (Litwak, 2022; Manwiller et al., 2023). In instances of non-apparent or invisible disabilities, individuals "must often bear the burden of securing the assistance they require" (Davis, 2005 cited in Manwiller et al., 2023, p. 647). Additionally, those with accommodations make efforts to minimize disruption to their organizations and peers to pre-empt and mitigate backlash (Manwiller et al., 2023).

Why not?

- Wanting to manage issues on their own
- Lack of awareness for accommodation processes (Giles-Smith & Popowich, 2023; Moeller, 2019)
- Costly in time and/or energy (Manwiller et al., 2023)
- Fear of negative consequences, perceived or actual:
  - Not being believed or seen to be exaggerating (Giles-Smith & Popowich, 2023; Manwiller et al., 2023; Siraki, 2021)
  - Accommodations being denied (Manwiller et al., 2023)

- Feeling singled out, targeted, or excluded (Giles-Smith & Popowich, 2023; Litwak, 2022; Shpigelman et al., 2022)
  - *Colleague or classmate envy and/or resentment (Giles-Smith & Popowich, 2023; Siraki, 2021)*
- Microaggressions, bullying, or hostility (Giles-Smith & Popowich, 2023; Litwak, 2022; Manwiller et al., 2023; Oud, 2018, 2019; Siraki, 2021)
- Pre-conceived notions about ability (Litwak, 2022; Siraki, 2021)

> *"All disabled librarians must feel safe disclosing and receiving accommodations for our field to be truly accessible" (Manwiller et al., 2023, p. 667)*

- Disclosure requires time, energy, and a sense of security (Manwiller et al., 2023). Unfortunately, leadership has often instead contributed to feelings of discomfort (Giles-Smith and Popowich, 2023). **Disclosure becomes more fraught for those with intersecting marginalized identities, such as race or gender** (Manwiller et al., 2023).

Suggestions

Gaps at the UBC iSchool	Suggestions	Implications
Environmental Gaps		
Class formats assume able-bodied students with no extracurricular obligations: classes are during the day and in-person. Flexible work schedules or remote options are often requested accommodations (Giles-Smith & Popowich, 2023; Manwiller et al., 2023; Oud, 2018, 2019).	• Offer more asynchronous and blended courses generally. • Offer evening courses. • Offer core courses in the second winter term or summer terms, for students who may not be able to study full-time.	More course offerings and schedules can be demanding for the limited availability of faculty. Many faculty are also parents or disabled themselves, and may not be able to accommodate these alternate schedules.
Formal documentation as required by the Centre for Accessibility **can be frustrating and demoralizing** (Giles-Smith and Popowich, 2023; Siraki, 2021). It also **privileges those document their struggles** through access to medical care (Giles-Smith and Popowich, 2023).	• Have a department-wide policy for that does not require application to the Centre for Accessibility or documentation. • Normalize accommodations for everyone, not just those who are disabled or in extenuating circumstances. • Provide a list of possible accommodations (Giles-Smith and Popowich, 2023).	This may take agency away from instructors over their courses and work schedules, and consequently be difficult to enforce, especially with adjunct faculty. It may also be taken advantage of by bad actors.
Curricular Gaps		
Existing core courses do not cover practical skills relating to working with disabled patrons (Pionke, 2020).	• Integrate practical skills into the core courses by including "more than one topic in this area, [interspersing] content throughout the course (rather than a single module), and [presenting] materials that thoughtfully and critically engage with disability and accessibility" (Simons et al., 2023, p. 699).	This will likely involve curricular and/or syllabus redesign, which the school has just conducted and may not be on the table for another few years.
Four main elective courses about diverse patron populations (LIBR 553, 559A, 565, and 579J) have had at least one offering per year, usually in winter term two, from 2018 to 2023.	• Perform an audit of existing courses about working with diverse populations, including disabled patrons. (Alajmi and Alshammari, 2020) • Increase the availability of these and other electives to once per winter and summer term, rather than once a year.	Audits can be time-consuming and the issues of faculty availability noted above apply here as well.

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