

SAA Accessibility Awareness Forum, 2010

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I am pleased and honored to have been invited to give a few remarks this afternoon on what I view as a sorely neglected topic within our profession: ensuring that our diversity efforts—whether in recruiting archivists, attracting and serving patrons, or expanding and strengthening our collections—consciously and actively include attention to individuals with disabilities.

Even within the broader SAA strategic initiative on diversity, individuals with disabilities have been largely overlooked or ignored until recently.¹ As one of only three articles I could find in our professional publications stated, “If the quantity of a profession's literature is an indication of that profession's interest in or awareness of a particular subject, it is fair to say that American archivists have not shown a particularly keen affinity for the disabled person.”²

Our sibling professionals, librarians, are far ahead in this area.³ In addition to major conferences focused on issues of accessibility in 2002 and 2007, in the decade of the 1990s alone, there were approximately 90 articles and books published for librarians working with, collecting for, or employing individuals with disabilities.

¹ The three conference sessions I could find included one in 2009 reporting on the Joint Working Group's efforts, one in 2008 reporting on documentation efforts that won an ALA award for the University of Toledo (see below), and a session in 2000 that should have engendered discussion, effort, and activity but sadly did not.

² Ronald L. Giraldi, “The Archival Setting and People with Disabilities: A Legal Analysis,” *American Archivist* 56:3 (Fall 1993), 705. Giraldi cites the only two other articles of which I'm aware: “Lance Fischer, “The Deaf and Archival Research: Some Problems and Solutions,” *American Archivist* 42:3 (October 1979): 463-64; Brenda Beasley Kepley, “Archives: Accessibility for the Disabled,” *American Archivist* 46:3 (Winter 1983): 42-51. In addition, the SAA reference manual, which only in its most recent edition finally devotes a mere paragraph and three additional sentences to a general exhortation about providing equal services and an accessible building for disabled patrons. Mary Jo Pugh, *Providing Reference Services for Archives and Manuscripts (Archival Fundamentals Series II)* (SAA, 2005), pp. 139-40, 176. Unfortunately, not even Elizabeth Adkin's SAA presidential address, “Our Journey Toward Diversity—and a Call to (More) Action,” *American Archivist* 71:1 (Spring/Summer 2008) made reference to disabilities or accessibility. SAA is hardly alone in paying little attention to accessibility. In the corporate world, the *Harvard Business Review*, a bible of middle and senior managers, has published only 7 articles related to individuals with disabilities since 1990. Since 1992, the *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review* has published only two such articles.

³ In 2007 the Association for Library Service to Children (ALSC) and the Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies (ASCLA), divisions of the American Library Association (ALA), hosted the preconference “The Underserved 20 Percent: Children, Teens, and Adults with Disabilities.” Unfortunately, there is no information about the content of this preconference on the web. See also, ALA, ASCLA, “Library Accessibility –What You Need to Know,” Monique DeLatte, editor, <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/ascla/asclaprotocols/accessibilitytipsheets/default.cfm>. Even earlier, in 2002, ALA's Office of Literacy and Outreach Services (OLOS) presented a pre-conference on serving individuals with disabilities, producing four good handouts in conjunction. <http://www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/offices/olos/disabilities/servicespeopledisabilities.cfm> and particularly Rhea Joyce Rubin, “Different Voices, Common Quest: ALA OLOS Preconference, June 2002--Serving People with Disabilities,” http://www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/offices/olos/outreachresource/docs/people_with_disabilities.pdf.

Would that it were so within our profession. One unexpected bright spot, this one dealing with documenting the disabled community, has come to my attention. The Association for Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies of ALA, in conjunction with the [National Organization on Disability \(NOD\)](#) and [Keystone Systems, Inc.](#), give an annual disabilities service award. In 2004 the award was given to an archival repository, the Ward M. Canaday Center for Special Collections, University of Toledo, for its Regional Disability History Archive Project.⁴

But why do I care in the first place? And why should you care? Any of you who know that I've undergone 12 orthopedic surgeries over the past 20 years in response to advanced osteoarthritis in my knees and ankles may assume that my progressive difficulty in mobility made me instantly sensitive to accessibility issues in my profession. You would be dead wrong; self-denial made it easy to remain, if you'll pardon the expression, blind to the concerns of others. I did learn one important thing, though, while still working as a field archivist for the Minnesota Historical Society, a job demanding increasingly difficult physical tasks of hauling hundreds of heavy boxes at a time.

When I finally admitted to myself that I could not continue doing such a job and told this to my boss, Jim Fogerty, he responded with practicality and compassion. He said he would try to find inexpensive assistance for me, to minimize the necessity of my personally functioning as a stevedore. He said, "your brain is much more important to us than your brawn." I still couldn't fathom a realistic scenario in which a field archivist could effectively operate without the ability to move boxes at a moment's notice, so I started looking in earnest for a desk job.

I found a purely administrative position at Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village, managing their research center, which demanded almost immediately that I become involved in planning a new building to house a reading room; museum, library, and archives work spaces; library and archives stacks; and staff offices. During this process I became aware of issues relating to physical accessibility for patrons in the reading room, and at the reference desk.

About physical accessibility, I learned among other things the huge variety of details necessary to consider in making a facility truly accessible, from electronic assists on the large entrance doors to security sensors wide enough for a wheelchair; from the spacing of work tables to provide wheelchair passage to the height of reading room bookshelves.

At the Henry Ford I was also responsible for initiating a major digitization effort and dramatically expanding the archives, artifacts, and library website. It was only by happenstance that I learned to be concerned about the accessibility of our web pages. We must address the question of whether our websites are optimized for individuals with vision and hearing impairments. Fortunately, there is a website, <http://wave.webaim.org/>, that will analyze any other site and give feedback on its accessibility for individuals with disabilities.⁵

⁴ http://www.ala.org/ala/newspresscenter/news/pressreleases2009/november2009/disability_ascla.cfm

⁵ It is run by WebAIM, or Web Accessibility in Mind. I highly recommend taking a few moments and plugging your own site into the Wave program. The one reference to this I could find in the professional literature is "while not addressed directly in this paper, it is also important, and in many cases mandated, to consider the Americans with

When I arrived as director of the American Heritage Center in 2002, I could not escape even greater awareness of disability issues. One important fact I learned was that just because a building is technically compliant with the ADA does not mean it is truly accessible. Built in 1993 by an eminent architect, and thus supposedly conforming to ADA requirements, our building opened with the “accessibility” for mobility impaired visitors consisting of a ramp a tenth of a mile long and a 4.5% grade (steep enough that on highways such grades are posted with warning signs for trucks)—all this to get them to the main entrance. Fortunately, by the time I arrived, the University had built an exterior elevator.⁶

Not too many years later, one of our employees asked to meet with me. He was accustomed to doing a great deal of physical work—moving and shelving boxes, climbing up 2-story shelving stacks, etc. But he had just learned that his back was permanently injured and he must limit his carrying and climbing. He was concerned such limitations might jeopardize his job. But he is an outstanding employee: creative, committed, willing to take on new challenges, always ready to volunteer, in short, someone I was not about to lose.

I found myself repeating to him what Jim Fogerty had told me those many years previously, and to back it up I worked with our business manager to shift sufficient funds to hire two part-time students, part of whose duties were to do the majority of the lifting and carrying he was used to doing.⁷ Within the limits of our budget I would do the same thing for any of our good archivists if it proved necessary to prevent their leaving in search of a less physically taxing job.

Most recently, our reference archivists pointed out to me that none of our researcher tables was tall enough to park a wheelchair under. We performed a low-cost fix by screwing risers to one of the tables. Our head of reference has also stationed a chair on the patron side of the reference desk, so that researchers who find it painful to stand for any length of time can sit comfortably when seeking assistance with their work. We have ensured that our new website template is as accessible as possible for users with disabilities.⁸

But, again, why is any of this important to our profession? One answer is simply that insofar as diversity is one of SAA's strategic priorities, we must ensure that disabled individuals are not overlooked. They, too, are underdocumented, underserved, and underrepresented in our profession. Another is that it is a selfish thing to do: As the US baby boom generation ages, a higher and higher percentage of individuals

Disabilities Act in constructing Web exhibits—institutional guidelines for these distinct issues of access will have to be consulted,” in Ian Craig Breaden, “Sound Practices: On-line Audio Exhibits and the Cultural Heritage Archive,” *American Archivist* 69:1 (Spring/Summer 2006), 56.

⁶ But that elevator deposited people in front of a massive set of glass and steel main doors, with no electronic assists. One of my early priorities, then, was to lobby the University to install such assistive devices, and in part because the school had recently committed to improving accessibility across campus, I was successful.

⁷ Like me, he still has a tendency to do more physical labor than is good for him sometimes, but at least that is more by choice than necessity.

⁸ We still have a few things yet to do. Two of our display cases are a bit too tall for visitors in wheelchairs, for example. But we're working on it, one step at a time, aiming to make and keep our public spaces, work spaces, and work life as accessible as possible.

are going to find themselves impaired, to varying degrees, by arthritis, COPD, heart ailments, and other illnesses that will require a degree of accommodation—we cannot afford to write this large segment of the profession or of our researchers off as too much trouble.

To a degree, sensitivity and accommodation for the disabled is also a matter of law. But too often, we find that organizations and businesses use the ADA, again I hope you'll pardon the expression, as a crutch, living by its letter and not much more. As the Joint Working Group on Diversity in Archives and Records Management's summary report of its online survey notes, "One of the most striking issues to come out of the survey is that while most institutions are more than willing to make accommodations for employees with disabilities, few, if any, are made for patrons with disabilities (beyond what is mandated by the Americans with Disabilities Act)."⁹

As I draw toward a conclusion this afternoon, let me ask you to ask yourselves or your administrators ten sets of questions:

1. Do you have a chair for patrons to sit in by the reference desk while they speak to a reference archivist?
2. Are your information and/or reference desks uniformly too tall to respectfully serve individuals in wheelchairs or scooters? Conversely, are your tables for researchers too low for wheelchairs to pull up far enough?
3. Do you have available for patrons tools as simple as magnifying glasses to assist those individuals with vision impairment?
4. Have you tried to navigate from your visitor and staff parking lots to your reading room and work areas in a wheelchair?
5. Have you thoughtfully analyzed the true necessity for requirements to "lift at least 35 pounds" found in so many archival job descriptions? Are there alternatives to that requirement that would permit you to hire or retain an otherwise excellent employee unable to carry heavy boxes?
6. Have you analyzed the accessibility of your website?
7. Have you tested the general ease with which your main public and staff doors swing open, or whether handles rather than knobs would make use easier and more efficient? The force necessary to open a door can usually be adjusted for no cost.
8. Do you have a prominent sign (and/or page on your website) offering necessary assistance to disabled individuals, to make such patrons feel more welcome?
9. Are your in-house exhibits accessible? For example, how tall are your cases? How large is the label font?
10. Have you considered whether documenting individuals and communities with disabilities should be a part of your acquisition goals? Even institutional archives may have the opportunity to acquire materials relating to employee support or social groups that can add to our understanding.

⁹ Michelle Ganz, SAA Joint Working Group on Diversity in Archives and Records Management, "Diversity in Archives and Records Management Survey," http://www.archivists.org/saagroups/archmgmt/df_110108_article.pdf

If your repository cannot answer yes to all these questions I would suggest you have some work to do. Few of these things are very expensive. All can make a big difference to employees, researchers, and communities.

Whether we have always been keenly aware of it or not, I believe ours must be a profession more about humans than about records. I certainly acknowledge that we all have too much to do and too little time and resources with which to do it. Worrying about, much less actually addressing, accessibility issues in your repository risks seeming like “just one more thing I’d like to do but can’t possibly.” Everything we actually decide to spend time and treasure on, however, is a matter of subjective priorities.

Our profession tends to implicitly prioritize means over ends, and technical process concerns over the human dimension of our work.¹⁰ We need to consider a broad reorientation of our professional ethos, one that gives priority to the people who do the work, who do the research, and who produce the records. Such a perspective will have profound consequences for our priorities. I hope Dennis Meissner will forgive me if I end by saying we should consider a policy of “More People, Less Process.” Thank you.

¹⁰ This is why I felt frustrated by attitudes and practices of arranging and describing collections, which Dennis Meissner and I considered focused too much on process and not enough on product, and too much about the collections and not enough about our researchers.