

Innovative Best Practices of Academic Libraries for Visually Challenged Users

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Abstract - This article extrapolates Innovative Best Practices for accessible libraries. Many Academic Libraries striving to provide accessible resources to students with Visual Impairment. Librarians have taken measures to satisfy the needs of the Visually Challenged library users. But the library staff are not satisfied with their services rendered to the special students. Best innovative practices described in this paper may help the Library Staff to reach the fullest satisfaction of the visually impaired students of Academic Institutions. The guidelines and suggestions are to be implemented to treat the students with disabilities especially the Visually Challenged library users in an academic environment are also described.

Keywords: Best Practices, Academic Libraries, Visually Challenged Users

I. INTRODUCTION

Library Professionals take pride in providing services to different kinds of Users. The need for improving library services by librarians for differently abled individuals such as Visually Impaired library users challenges accessing the library including transportation, physical environment at the library and social interaction. It discusses issues that libraries need to address to help Visually Impaired patrons, which include collection, infrastructure, training, Literacy programmes etc.

Even though each library may have its own specific resources and challenges in addressing the needs of Visually Challenged students, there are a few steps that all libraries can take as a starting point to meet their mission to make their spaces and services as inclusive as possible. These include addressing issues relating to noise and lighting, which, as specific requirements of its special noted above, affect many Visually Impaired students. Once a library has identified the users and determined what resources are available to build a friendly environment for the VI students, it can then proceed further. To prepare the VI students to visit the library the library staff have to adopt innovative practices.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Samson (2011) aimed to establish a set of best practices that reflect the spirit of the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and comply with the new 2010 Department of Justice regulations. He shared that at each of eight academic

libraries in four Rocky Mountain states, the librarian most directly responsible for library services to students with disabilities was interviewed, comprehensive criteria to physical facilities, services, management practices, and investments were used, access leading to and within the library was considered, and data and observations to place each library in the framework of the diametrically opposed reactive or universal access service models were analysed.

Mutula, Stephen and Majinge, Rebecca M. (2016) stated that students living with visual impairments in University libraries need information for writing assignments, tests, examinations, research and more like their counterparts without visual impairments. In addition, the sources of information preferred by students living with visual impairments include library staff, classmates, friends, readers employed by disability units to assist them to read, OPAC and databases. Authors also stated that assistive technologies can effectively be used to facilitate access to information by students living with visual impairments in University libraries. Authors suggested the necessary policy and practical interventions where they do not exist should be promulgated so that assistive technologies, infrastructure (e.g. building layout) and resources should be made available to face these challenges facing students living with visual impairments in the universities.

Shimomura *et al.*, (2010) expressed that the computers are becoming tools of communication, information exploring and studying for young people, regardless of their abilities. Scientists have been building knowledge on how blind people can substitute hearing or touch for sight or how the combination of senses, i.e., multimodalities, can provide the user with an effective way of exploiting the power of computers. The authors present a study on how young blind people use computers for everyday tasks with the aids of assistive technologies, aiming to understand what hindrances they encounter when interacting with a computer using individual senses, and what supports them. They mention that the common assistive technology is a screen reader, producing output to a speech synthesizer or a Braille display.

According to National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), "Best practice may be innovative and be a philosophy, policy, strategy, program, process or practice

that solve a problem or create new opportunities and positive impact on organizations. Institutional excellence is the aggregate of the best practices followed in different areas of institutional activities. The following practices can attract more users with visual impairment to the library.

III. INFORMATION LITERACY PROGRAMMES, WORKSHOPS USING ICT

Visual impairments change the way that the students gather information and limit the opportunities to learn through observation. The ICT literacy is very essential for visually-impaired students to access educational resources and programmes such as those delivered via the internet or multimedia educational portals. So the Academic Libraries should organize computer literacy programmes and workshops using computers for the Visually-impaired students to make them learn the skills of ICT.

IV. ORIENTATION AND TRAINING PROGRAMME

Orientation and Training Programmes should be conducted on a regular basis to keep the users updated about the latest technologies. Training or demonstration on the use of general or specialized equipment available in the library can be arranged. Training on Information Technology should be given to the students with disabilities. Students should be trained to access to Internet Resources and Services.

Library staff can also organize workshops and training programmes on the topics related to accessible technology. They can also host many networking groups, resources fairs, writing and other events. The institution should provide latest assistive technologies for visually impaired students for creating learning environment. These should be listed in the newsletter and should be available in the large print, Braille format, email, Website with audio version, or over the phone.

V. LIBRARY POLICIES FOR THE DISABLED STUDENTS

The Library Management should endeavour to bridge the gap between the information needs of the non-disabled users and disabled users. There should be clear and concrete written policy for the library services to the students with disabilities.

Each library should establish a Decision Making Committee headed by a senior faculty member and disabled students representative to find out the requirement of the other disabled library users. Policies and procedures for the disabled users are to be advertised in the Library Bulletin board and Library Publications.

Loans /Fines/Charges policies should be flexible enough to provide the students with disabilities a customized services. It is suggested to have a policy on how to request for accommodation.

VI. CONDUCTING USER SURVEY PERIODICALLY

Academic libraries are suggested to conduct survey of the Visually Challenged library users periodically as it is very important and major tool for any library that go for assessment. This practice will give a clear picture of the number of Visually Challenged students visit library and take a closer look at how well they are serving the needs of the special users.

VII. INSTITUTING ANNUAL BEST USER AWARD FOR VISUALLY IMPAIRED STUDENTS

This practice is to encourage the students with Visual Impairment to make maximum use of library resources and Assistive Devices acquired by the library. This also will attract more Visually Impaired users to the library.

VIII. CAREER / EMPLOYMENT INFORMATION / SERVICES

All of us are very well aware that library is the soul of every educational institution and the users are main part of the library, they come to library for searching information regarding their career or educational development. In the competitive world students must be aware of the situation that library plays an important role in solving their problems. Library should have rich collection of Competitive Examination books and career guides in the Audio and Braille format.

IX. INTERNET FACILITIES TO VISUALLY CHALLENGED USER GROUPS

Access to electronic information resources is becoming the key issues for inclusion programmes for the Visually Impaired and closely tied to the provision of assistive tools. So the library staff should take steps in providing internet facilities to them so as to enable them to access to e-resources to complete their assignments. Also they should provide computer to gain access to the internet for information search; ability to use Computer with JAWs application to access information, and ability to use computer with Zoom text application effectively are others abilities they possess.

And also the visually impaired students should be given training on the use of assistive technologies such as Jaws and Zoom text application and on the installation of JAWs and Zoom text application software by libraries to assist them in the process of learning.

Library staff in the Academic Libraries have to keep the following guidelines before serving the disabled students especially Visually Challenged students:

1. Treat the Students with disabilities with the same respect and consideration that you give to other normal students.

2. Ask a student with a disability if he/she needs help before helping.
3. Talk directly to the student with a disability, not through the student's companion.
4. Refer to a student's disability only if it is relevant to the conversation.
5. Avoid negative descriptions of a student's disability. For example, "a person who uses a wheelchair" is more appropriate than "a person confined to a wheelchair." Library staff have to remember, in actuality, a wheelchair is not confining its liberating.
6. Refer to the person first and then the disability. "A man who is blind" is better than "a blindman" because it emphasizes the person first.

X. SUGGESTIONS FOR THE LIBRARY STAFF TO ASSIST THE USERS WITH DISABILITIES

1. Library staff should be aware of the problems of the disability
2. Staff should be trained in the use of telecommunication devices for the deaf (TTD/TTY) and adaptive computer technology provided in the library.
3. Policies and procedures for providing accommodations to users with disabilities should be known by the library professionals.
4. Staff should have knowledge about other organizations, such as federally-funded talking book and Braille libraries that provide information services to patrons with disabilities.
5. If there are staff members with sign language skills, they should be identified to other staff members so that, when available, they can assist users who are deaf.

XI. CONCLUSION

The best practices will not only help the libraries to improve their quality of services but also will create best images of the libraries and library profession in the society. The best practices adopted will bridge the gap between library and user for maximum utilization of the resources. The web based innovative practices are vital for providing up to date information to all kind of users. Thus undertaking all above best practices by every academic library creates its own image in the minds of the students and the society.

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