Accessibility Assessment of the Scholars' Commons Department

Spring 2021 E. Lingle Craig Fellowship Project Report

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SUMMARY

This report details the research, walkthrough summary, and recommendations that I developed during my semester as the E. Lingle Craig Fellow. The project that I developed this semester was an accessibility assessment of the Scholars' Commons Department area, and though this project I learned a lot about accessibility and how services are used and offered in general libraries. A Walkthrough of the Scholars' Commons area was completed in March 2021 and included are photographs from that assessment. My suggested recommendations are followed by the walkthrough section, some of which include lowering the Scholars' Commons reference desk and adding designated wheelchair accessible seating by the workstations. Finally, the report is completed by a list of suggested readings on library accessibility accommodations and recommendations.

INTRODUCTION

In this report I am detailing the work that I completed as my fellowship project during the spring 2021 semester. This report includes my original project proposal and the modifications made to that proposal, and the goals I created for myself as outcomes for this project and the goals created by my supervisor and Head Librarian of Scholars' Commons Anna Marie Johnson and the Dean of Libraries Carolyn Walters. The report also includes the research that went into learning more about Indiana University Libraries accessibility and general library accessibility. That section will include a summary of what I learned from one of the library departments and one of the offices that are housed in the library, some comparisons to other Big Ten Libraries, and key knowledge I gathered from reading accessibility articles. Additionally, the report will include a summarization of the walkthrough survey of the Scholars' Commons Department, conducted with Anna Marie Johnson. Lastly, the report will address the recommendations I have developed to further improve the accessibility standards of the Scholars' Commons area, both physical and virtual.

PROPOSAL

Original Proposal

This project will focus on the accessibility standards displayed and understood within the IU Libraries system. IU libraries follows ADA accessibility standards, but it would be beneficial to learn how the students and faculty truly feel about how accessible the library is for them and others when seeking assistance. This assessment will involve a survey of the libraries within the library system of the Bloomington campus. However,

due to Covid-19 not all of the libraries are open to the public, so the main focus and trial run will focus on Herman B. Wells Library. This project will be completed in two parts. The first part will involve creating and distributing a survey to library users about the physical and visual accessibility of the library, as well as the resources that are available to library users with disabilities. The second part of the project will focus on developing a series of webinars on the accessibility of the library and resources available to library users.

PART 1:

The first stage for the project involves designing a survey to be sent out to all library users on how accessible they view the library to be, and the types of resources that are available to library users with disabilities. The second stage for the project involves completing a detailed survey of physical accessibility within the Wells Library. This involves reviewing the ADA standards for buildings, especially buildings that serve as high traffic areas within a highly public setting. Completing this survey will help to understand whether or not the building was built and updated with accessibility in mind, or if that was an afterthought. Knowing this kind of information is helpful to understand how library users choose to access the library, whether it is in-person or through online resources. The third stage for the project involves completing a detailed survey of the visual accessibility within the Wells Library. This involves checking signage and the visual screens that display library information. Through this we are trying to make sure that the fonts large enough, the font color is appropriate, the font type is ADA acceptable, and that there is braille font on all the signs. For the visual screens we want to make sure and check what the time limit that each ad/flyer stays on each screen is,

are they touch screens so that users can zoom in if needed and is there some type of read aloud function that users can have made available to them. One of the main outcomes of this survey could be the development of extra signage, and cards to hand out about the services and accessibility available to library users. The fourth stage for this project involves looking over the library's website, or more specifically the scholar's commons page and the library's accessibility/accommodations pages to make sure that everything found there is up to ADA standards. Another main outcome from this survey that would be beneficial is a more detailed page for "Assistance for Library Users with Disabilities at Wells Library" and possibly graphics that showcase where the entrances are in the library for library users with disabilities. The final stage for this project involves compiling all of the information from the areas surveyed and reflecting on what is truly feasible to be accomplished in the future years of the library, and the kinds of accessibility services both visually and physically available to them.

PART 2:

The only stages of this part of the project would involve developing an online series that informs users on the different accessibility services and resources available at the library in order to make their experience at and with the library more beneficial. This online series will give an overview of why accessibility in the library is important, the impacts it has on students, faculty and staff, and the different ways in which Wells Library adheres to making the library accessible for all. These webinars would be recorded.

Modified Proposal

While the heart of my original proposal, accessibility assessment, stayed the same, some of the additional details that would support the assessment were changed. Mainly the changes were due to time constraints of one semester, and what I had proposed was very ambitious. The supplemental elements of the project that were modified included changing accessibility videos and webinars to content for this library's webpage. This would now be a library guide on accessibility that would house all the library related information in one location, as opposed to various sites one currently has to navigate through.

GOALS

Project Goals

The goals of the project involved researching accessibility issues within libraries in general, conducting an accessibility audit on the Scholars' Commons space using the accessibility checklist/seating guidelines created by Jaci Wilkinson, Head of Discoverability and User Experience, looking through the Scholars' Commons webpages to see what can be added, and then creating content, through way of libguides, that will showcase the library accessibility services available in the library.

Personal Goals

The personal goals I had created for myself, and the project included the following. My first goal involved helping library users to understand that the library provides accessibility to all users. The next goal was to learn more about general accessibility and accessibility resources as they related to the benefit and advocacy of library users. Through training workshops from my library jobs, I had gained some understanding

about library accessibility, but I wanted to gain a more in-depth understanding for this project. Another goal for this project was to create more visibility about the importance of accessibility within the libraries and have this showcased in a physical way, such as the addition of signs. The last goal I created for this project involved developing webinars about accessibility and library users regarding Wells Library.

The first two of these goals really became one goal of wanting to learn about accessibility regarding libraires and learning how the library can continue to be a better advocate. The third goal at the time was the most important for me to address, because there seemed to be a lack of awareness and visibility on how to access accessibility resources. The last goal was modified when the project was selected and turned into the accessibility library guides and the useable content.

RESEARCH

Understanding Disability Services from other Library Departments and Offices

For this part of the project, I wanted to learn about the services that are offered to patrons who may have a disability. I wanted to speak with offices and departments in the library that had the most human interaction on a typical day. The first office that I wanted to speak with was Disability Services for Students (DSS). While DSS is not part of the departments administered by the libraries, it does happen to conveniently be in the library, so I wanted to find out if because of their location did they have any opinions or knowledge about accessibility services in the library. I was able to have a Zoom meeting with Shirley Stumpner, who is the Director of DSS, and ask her a few questions that would help me build a better understanding.

The first question that I wanted to learn about were the choices that disability services gives students regarding the physical space of the library, but specifically the Scholars' Commons area, and if there were steps that were taken to cater to any of their personal needs. What I learned from Shirley was that when it came to the library physical spaces, it was all about making sure that a student felt comfortable in the space, but sometimes that could be an issue with the type of furniture that is currently placed in the space. For example, the large red chairs, or the high table that sits outside the IQ wall and the high seating in the IQ wall room. I also was informed that there are not many students on campus that use wheelchairs as part of their disability, so the spacing of tables, workstations and shelves was generally not an issue as it stands.

The next question that I wanted to learn about was, since Shirley has been the Director, what issues with accessibility had she noticed that had not been resolved. To her knowledge if there were any challenges within the library that delt with the physical space they were resolved. This would seem to be a good indication that accessibility standards were being followed within the library. Shirley also wanted to point out that she and the disability student services department had not always been located in the library, so if there were issues with the physical space before then, she was not aware of them.

Another question asked regarded any complaints about the library and its space not being accessible, or about any resources that needed to be improved upon. When I

learn from that question was that there were not any complaints and the library, and the staff really tries to go out of their way to help students be accommodated and comfortable in the library. Shirley also said that there very well could be issues that students have had about the library, but have never told anyone about them, so there would not be a way to improve if students are not complaining or venting. Some examples that she gave about helping students within the library have been moving or changing desks if the space they are in, such as one of the study rooms, if the desk is too small for the student, or helping the student find a more accessible space.

Lastly, I asked Shirley about any recommendations that she thought could improve the library's physical and online spaces. To reiterate what she said earlier, the height of the tables could be lowered, and the large chairs could be changed or spaced out more for better navigation and being user-friendly. On the side of online resources or computer applications, she was unsure if JAWS worked when on the library website.

Overall, I found that my conversation with Shirley was very beneficial to learn about the services that are already offered and the dedication that the library tries to help the students in any way that they can.

The library department that I reached out to was Access Services, mainly the circulation desk area. I emailed Randy Lent, Head of Access Services, to learn about how circulation responds to accessibility requests. More so, during pre-pandemic times, and what I learned from Randy is that circulation does and tries to accommodate "any

reasonable request". By that he meant if someone needed helping selecting books on shelves or learning about services on how they can get books to them if they are unable to retrieve them themselves, those would fall under reasonable. Randy also informed me that the circulation desk also has an accessible check out area, that was part of a remodel and that is widely used by regular patrons. Overall, once again Randy expressed that they are always happy to help and serve the library patrons.

From those two interactions I learned that when it came to accessible services and resource accommodations, the library staff is always willing to help in any way that they can when asked. Upon reflecting on trying to build an understanding with Indiana University Libraries accessibility, I should have reached out to more offices, and the other branch libraries on campus. Even though my physical accessibility assessment was focused on the Scholars' Commons department, my research did not need to be. It would have been an additional benefit to learn about how the other branches work through making their services the most accessible. If a project like this is done again, that is something that I would recommend the next fellow who wants to complete an accessibility assessment to incorporate.

Understanding General Library Accessibility: Academic Research on Accessibility Services in Libraries

To develop background knowledge on the general topic of library accessibility, I wanted to research videos, talks, and articles on the subject. There were a few areas that I wanted to become familiar with, such as dealings with physical and online spaces, software and library resources, and less physical accessibility needs, such as mental

illness and behavioral needs. From the articles that I read, many of the solutions and recommendations were not physically applied changes but offered more knowledge on how to be aware of certain behaviors that may be commonly thought of when making a space accessible. Such as knowing how to assist someone on the Autism spectrum, helping veterans who may have PTSD, or knowing how to address service animals. While reading these articles and watching talks, while they were created from academic institutions, it often seems like most of these issues could also occur in a public library setting. I have known many academic libraries to also serve the larger public, but I have noticed that sometimes reactions and services are different if it is for someone who is not affiliated with the university. Reading about these less common academic issues is important because accessibility is a much broader concept when assisting others.

The videos that I watched came from talks, and they mainly addressed how their schools have changed their accessibility services to be more inclusive, or they would touch on the importance of accessibility. The other videos on accessibility were created by public libraries, and they featured more resources that they already use and what is available to the public. In one of the videos the San Francisco Public Library showcased their accessibility toolkits, which are these small kits that have headphones, different colored pens, a magnifying reader, and a large font keyboard for anyone to checkout during their time in the library if they need. That was probably the most fascinating concept I had come across, and it is why I put create an accessibility toolkit as a recommendation later in this report. From doing this research, some of the non-physical

recommended changes came from reading and viewing what other libraries are already doing.

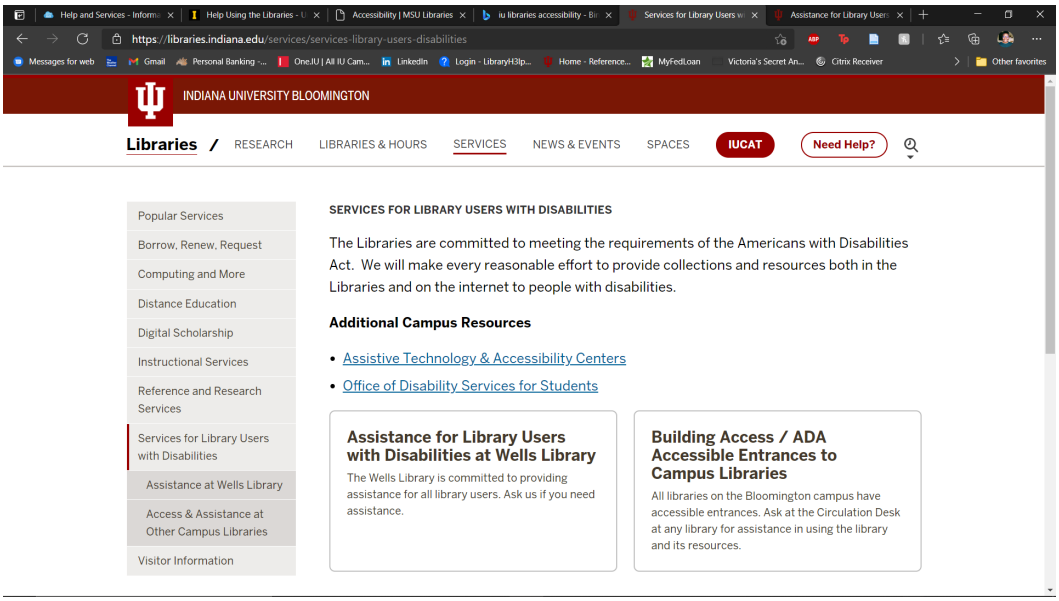
Understanding General Library Accessibility: Comparing Big Ten School's Accessibility Pages to IU

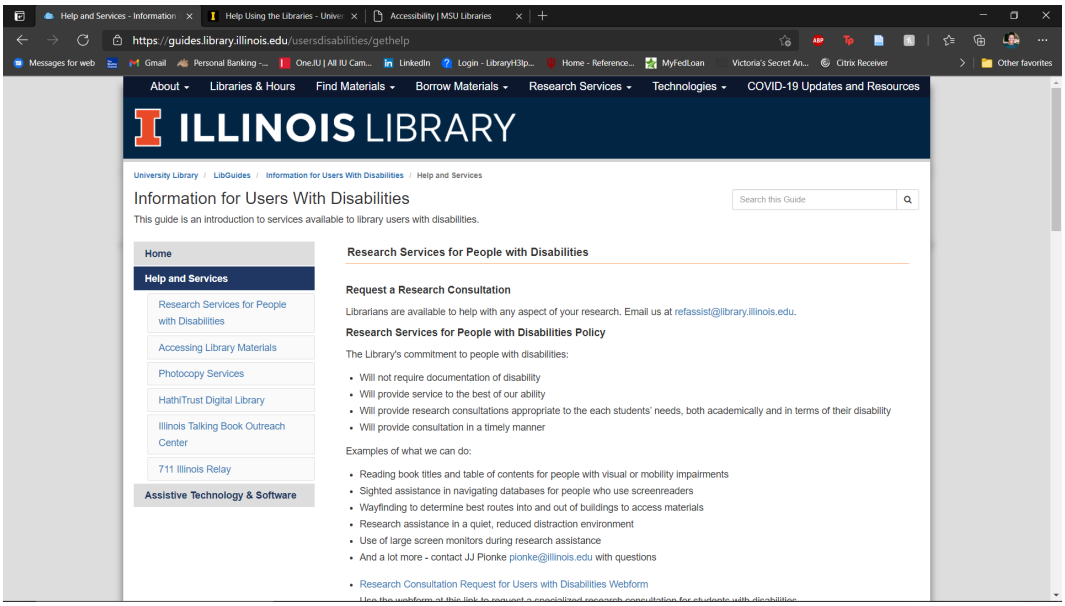
The main content that was going to be developed for this project was a library guide that would house all the accessibility resources and information in one place. The current accessibility page that is housed on the library's website does not present all its information in one place, and that is what the new library guide would do.

I looked over all the Big Ten universities' library accessibility pages to compare if their sites were like IU's and contrast which sites were different and more detailed about their services. The schools that offered more detailed pages were the University of Illinois, University of Iowa, Michigan State University, and Purdue University. These pages would either offer their basic information about accessibility services and initiatives in the library at the top and then become more detailed as one navigated down the page, or on the other hand, the pages would offer tabbed groups (in the style of a library guide) and their basic information and accessibility statement would be the first tab, and the following would cover research, access, staffing, parking, and other relevant services.

Depicted are the screenshotted pages below for the five schools.

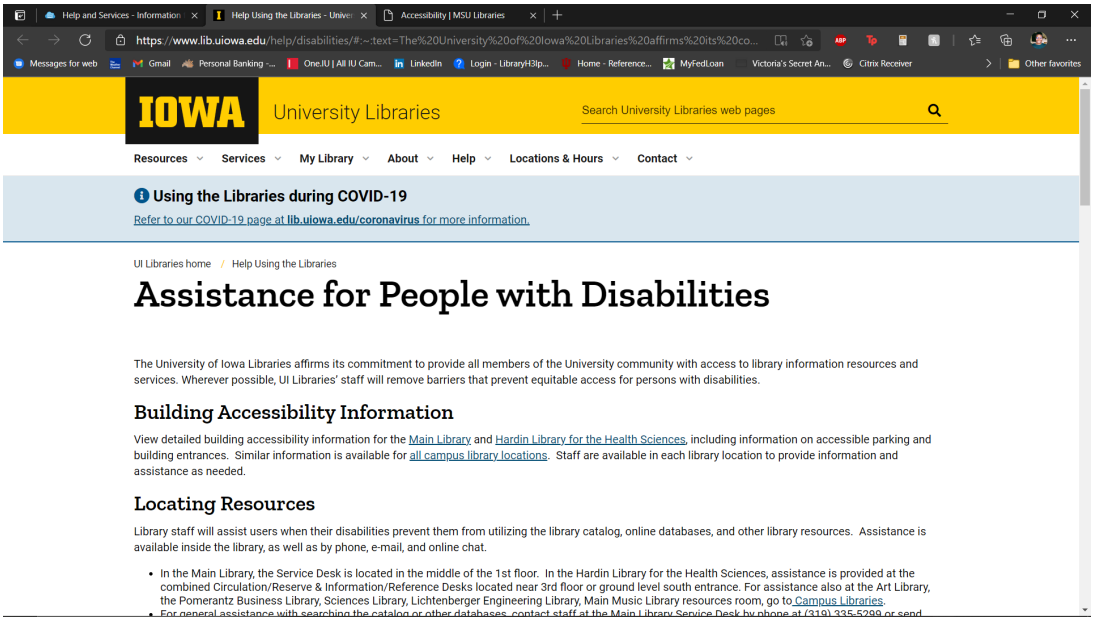
Indiana University Bloomington



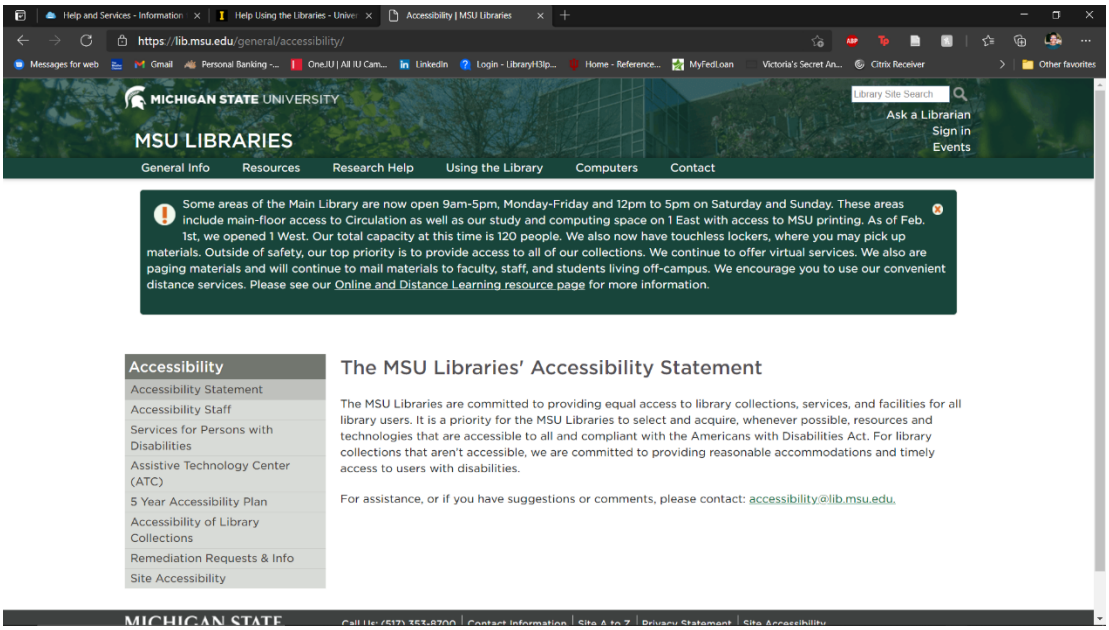


University of Illinois, Champagne-Urbana

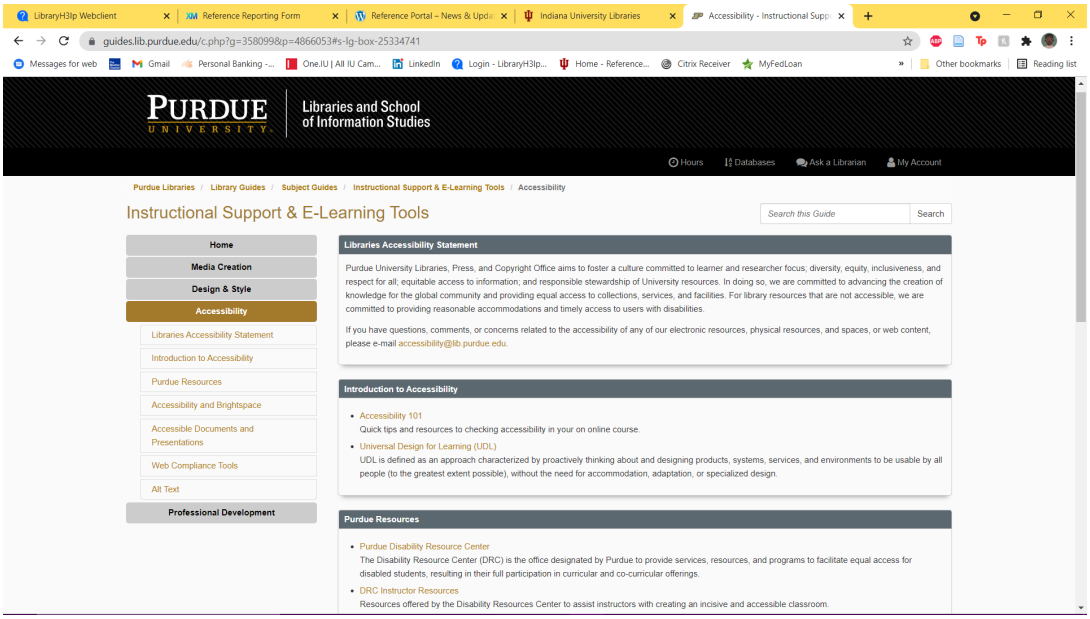
University of Iowa



Michigan State University



Purdue University



The Purdue University library accessibility is the format that the library guide that I gathered information for will resemble.

WALKTHROUGH OF SCHOLARS' COMMONS AREA

The goal of this walk through was to get a general sense if the accessibility guidelines that were created by Jaci Wilkinson were all in place, and just looking around to visually see what areas could also be considered for a more accessible remodel when there is an opportunity.

Overall, the Scholars' Commons area meets the accessibility requirements from the guidelines that were used, but there were some improvements that could be made to make the space better. One of those being with the Scholars' Commons desk, and making sure that the middle area, which seems to be the area that was created as the accessible space walk up space, is clear of any standing flyers and general items so it really feels and shows that that space is for someone, for instance in a wheelchair. It would not be friendly and good service if we were just peering over at them from the taller parts of the desk.

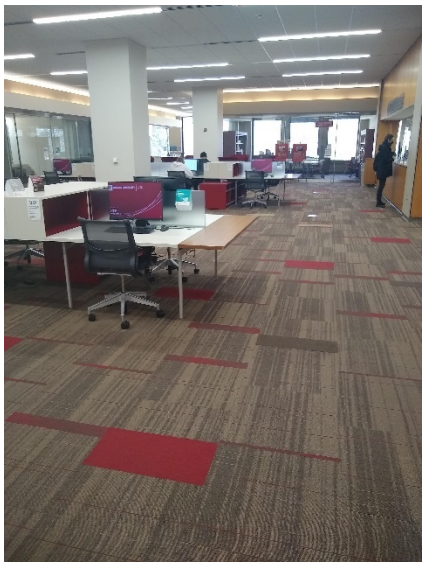
Another issue we noticed was the lack of signage, and while that may not fall into the preconceived concept of increasing accessibility the lack of signage informing people what is where, like the printing station, that the large desk area to the far left of the area is circulation, or access services. Many times, when we were working reference in person, I have been asked which desk is circulation or if we had printers, so more signage seemed appropriate to include. One thing that was noted in the accessibility guidelines for the library spaces here, was about having braille on the computers for spots that were for the on button, or headphones or USB ports. Those were not present

as far as we could tell on the computes, and since that is something that is listed as a requirement that should be on the computers, it not being there is an issue.

Overall, surveying the space was much needed as it gave us a chance to think more about the physical space of the library, and more so about the little things that are also important that can often be overlooked.

Here are some images from the walkthrough of the Scholars' Commons.

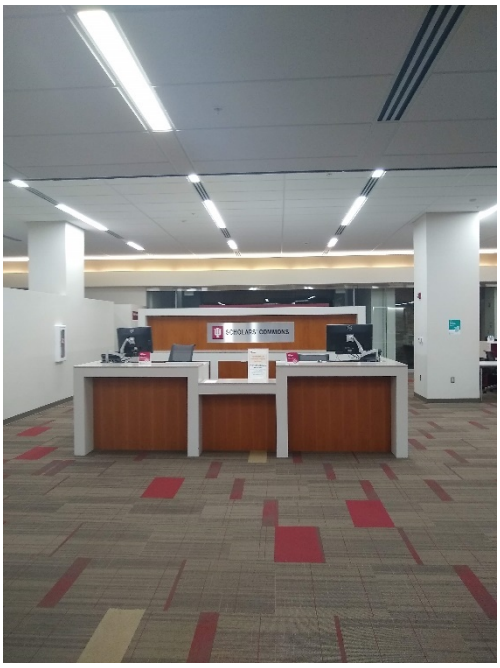
This picture was taken in the Reference Reading room. While the aisle are the standard width according to ADA standards, this is this aisle at the end that is an issue. This row of desks makes selecting a book difficult, and you can see in the photo even without people sitting there it appears small.



This photo was taken to point out the wooden extension that is attached at the ends of the desks. We were not sure of their purpose, but it seemed like this could be seating that would potentially be the wheelchair accessible space.

This photo was taken to show the lack of signage. While signage is not exactly as accessibility issue, it is something that would help improve the visitor's understanding of

the function of the space. For example, often the Scholars' Commons desk is mistaken for the circulation desk, or often people ask if there are printers when they have walked right passed them. This represents the free space that could be used to provide more visual awareness of the space.

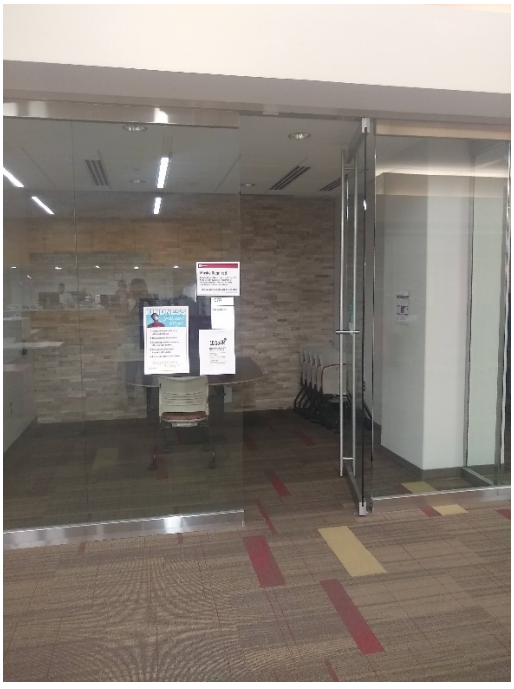


This photo was taken to show the reference desk. Notice how the two higher ends are where the librarians or reference assistants would sit, and while you cannot see the height from this far back the desk is quite high. While sitting in the chairs that puts the person working at an even higher level compared to the visitors or patrons. The middle area of the desk is supposed to be the "accessible" space, but as you can see it is used to place flyers and flyer stands, which takes away its true purpose. A re-design that is lower would make the desk more accessible.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Physical space recommendations

1. Keeping the middle part of the Scholars' Commons desk clear of signage.
2. Making the middle part of the Scholars' Commons desk a third sitting area.
3. Have the Scholars' Commons desk lowered to provide a neutral ground to serve a variety of patrons OR Have the Scholars' Commons desk lowered and moveable in parts and have different stations of reference in the area. [Monroe County Public Library has lowered and movable wheeled desks like this.]
4. Place any informational signage attached it to the front of the desk – this will help to keep the middle and upper sides clear.
5. Applying braille to at least one computer grouping where the USB ports are located.
6. Consider changing the study room and IQ Wall doors to sliding doors.
7. Make it a policy for study room doors to remain open unless someone is using them.



8. Designate 1 or 2 seating spaces in the reference reading room, per groupings of seats, to be for wheelchair accessibility – there can be a chair to the side if someone not needing a wheelchair uses the space, but they need to move the chair back when done.
9. Install an additional lower shelving range sign in the reference reading room and have the ranges in braille.
10. Install and create signs that direct the user to the printer space, circulation desk, and reference desk (Scholars' Commons).
11. Print news signs in the study rooms in various languages, or in the languages that are the most common for the school and city area.
12. Consider lowering the height of the table that sits outside of the IQ Wall.

13. Consider smaller furniture [referring to the four large red chairs].

14. Invest in 1 or 2 accessibility toolkits that can be stored at the reference desk cabinets.
15. Consider developing proxy card/forms to allow students to pick up books for other students who have a disability or a need for someone else to pick up their books.

Online space recommendation

1. When selecting computer/room reservations, they need to say whether computer or space is accessible (wheelchair/other disability)
2. Info boxes on reservation page should again say whether the space/computer is accessible.
3. On the libraries page about accessible parking and entrances, visual representations should be considered as an addition to the page.

SUGGESTED READINGS

These readings are being suggested because they cover a broad range of topics on providing accessible services in the library.

Getts, E., & Stewart, K. (2018). Accessibility of distance library services for deaf and hard of hearing users. *Reference Services Review, 46(3)*, 439-448.

Marrall, R. M. (2016). Assistance animals in the library: How one academic library developed best practices. *Reference & User Services Quarterly, 56 (1)*, 8-13.

Mulliken, A. (2017). There is nothing inherently mysterious about assistive technology: A qualitative study about blind user experiences in us academic libraries. *Reference & User Services Quarterly, 57(2)*, 115-126.

Pionke, J. J. (2017) Beyond ADA compliance: The library as a place for all. *Urban Library Journal, 23(1)*, 1-17.

Pionke, J. J. (2019). The impact of disbelief: On being a library employee with a disability. *Library Trends, 67(3)*, 423-435.

Pionke, J. J. (2019). Veteran views of the library. *Reference & User Services Quarterly, 58(4)*, 227-234.

Remy, C., & Seaman, P. (2014). Evolving from disability to diversity: How to better serve high-functioning autistic students. *Reference & User Services Quarterly, 54(1)*, 24-28.

Sanchez-Rodriguez, N. A., & LoGiudice Joseph. (2018) Building bridges: Fostering dynamic partnerships between the library department and office of student disability services in higher education. *Journal of Access Services, 15 (4)*, 142-160.

Schroeder, H. M. (2018). Implementing accessibility initiatives at the Michigan State University Libraries. *Reference Services Review, 46(3)*, 399-413.

Taylor, C. S. (2019). The inclusive services assessment and guide for Wisconsin public libraries. *Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction Public Library Development Team*. https://dpi.wi.gov/sites/default/files/imce/pld/pdf/Inclusive_Services_Assessment_and_Guide_for_Wisconsin_Public_Libraries_2019_updated_Sept.pdf .