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Disability, Identity, and Professionalism: Precarity in Librarianship

CHRISTINE M. MOELLER

ABSTRACT

Although the field of disability studies has examined disability across many contexts, the experience of library workers remains largely unexamined. Library literature tends to focus on the experiences of library users, rather than address the structural inequities in the profession itself. In the United States, current conversations within higher education and academic librarianship around resilience and professionalism create additional barriers to inclusion and exclude the lived experiences of those with disabilities. Additionally, existing processes designed to address disability treat its existence as a problem in need of a solution, and in doing so, further contribute to the workplace precarity experienced by library workers. Instead of maintaining existing systemic barriers and perpetuating an ableist professional ideal that places responsibility on the individual to be resilient, libraries and library workers need to redefine professionalism, minimize the stigma associated with any type of disability, and reduce precarity for disabled library employees. Only then can libraries and library workers focus on equity and inclusion for all.

INTRODUCTION

While critical disability studies have increasingly examined issues of identity, accessibility, and inclusion across higher education, focusing on both students and faculty, the experience of library workers remains largely unexamined. Library literature, in general, looks outward at disability and accessibility, framing the conversation in terms of how to best serve users' needs. These articles often take a "retrofitting" approach that frames disability and accessibility as problems that need to be solved, and they

rarely look inward at the structural inequities in the profession itself. In the United States, current conversations within higher education and academic librarianship around resilience and professionalism promote an ableist perspective that excludes the lived experiences of those with disabilities by creating barriers to inclusion. Thus disabled library workers experience precarity in a workplace, and a profession, that does not acknowledge their lived experiences or their needs. Rather than reinforcing these structural inequities, libraries must enact structural change in order to create and promote a culture of inclusion and equity for both library users and library workers.

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON DISABILITY

For the purposes of this article, the word *disability* is not limited by any single legal definition (all of which tend to adopt a limited view of disability) but rather takes on a broad meaning, including physical disabilities, chronic illnesses, mental disabilities, and learning and developmental disabilities. This approach includes those who may not necessarily identify as disabled, yet whose bodies and minds deserve to be part of this discussion.

Disability has no single definition but is defined in a wide variety of ways, including medical, social, and activist or social-justice approaches. Most legislation in the United States focuses on the medical model of disability, which originated in the early twentieth century and focuses on an individual's degree of impairment and the disadvantages that person may face due to the consequences of that particular impairment. Under this model, often referred to as a deficit model, the impairment is viewed as a deficit or problem to be solved or eliminated through medical or other treatments (Evans 2017, 57). While a wheelchair might help address mobility issues, within this model, what is the solution for an incurable chronic illness that causes physical and mental differences, or for anxiety or depression? What is the solution for a problem that even the medical community can't always answer? This framing of disability as a problem to be solved may fit a few cases but largely ignores the complexities and unpredictable nature of living with one or more disabilities.

The field of disability studies and disability activism adopts a different view of disability, one that does not focus on a disabled individual but instead focuses on the social, political, and economic factors that define disability and create barriers to equality. This model emerged through disability activism efforts in the 1980s as a response to the medical model, which did not seem to reflect the lived experiences of those with disabilities. Rather than framing the individual as the one in need of change, the social model posits that society itself needs to change (Nishida 2016, 150–51). Where the medical model situates disability within the individual body, the social model instead situates disability in the social environment and in the barriers that exist in that environment (Evans 2017, 62). The

field of critical disability studies (CDS) pushes the social model even further and challenges it in some ways by contending that disability is also political and cultural, in addition to being socially constructed. Additionally, CDS critiques the medical model and investigates the assumptions underlying current attitudes and responses toward disabilities, along with the numerous structural barriers that exist for those with disabilities. In this way and others, CDS “disrupts the idea that disabled people should be defined primarily through their disabilities by others, retaining instead the right for disabled people to define their own relationships with disability” (Dolmage 2017, 5). Furthermore, CDS views disability itself as “fluid and temporal,” differing across contexts and identities (Evans 2017, 67). Recently, CDS has increasingly incorporated the social-justice model of disability by focusing on the impact of *ableism*, a term used to define the oppression of those with disabilities based on the view that able-bodiedness and able-mindedness are the expected norm (Dolmage 2017, 7). The social-justice model of disability focuses on “privilege and oppression as major influences in shaping how disability is viewed and experienced,” emphasizes “diversity and intersectionality of the disabled individual’s experiences, roles, and identities,” and has an “intentionally educational mission” (Evans 2017, 72). Where the CDS model offers critique, the social-justice model offers educational action aimed at redefining “normal,” promoting equity and respect, and forwarding positive disability identities (Evans 2017, 74). When combined, then, these models offer a way to both identify and critique systemic barriers and forge a new path forward.

As the social-justice model acknowledges, for people who may or may not identify as disabled, that aspect of their experience is only one facet of their identity, yet many of the existing attempts to define disability and accessibility ignore the ways in which disability intersects with other facets of lived experience. In discussing intersectionality, a term first used by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) to describe the ways in which multiple systems of power come together to magnify oppression, Knight (2017, 68) explains that “intersectionality holds that structural oppressions—such as racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, and ableism—do not act independently of one another” but instead “interrelate, creating a system of oppression that reflects the intersection of multiple forms of discrimination.” To fully understand the lived experience of people with disabilities, “we cannot ignore gender or race. A disabled individual is not genderless, and personal circumstances are not separated from gender and race” (Alshammari 2017, 32). For example, all-gender restrooms may or may not be equipped with electronic doors, or may be in a location that is not easily accessible. Disability cannot be considered as insular and separate from other aspects of identity but must be viewed as one form of oppression that likely intersects with others. In higher education, “the addition of intersecting identities (e.g., race, gender, disability, class, and more) and

social injustice makes even sharper distinctions of how the privilege and power distributed across academia is experienced differently” (Nishida 2016, 146). This intersectionality must be taken into account to create libraries that are truly accessible and inclusive to all.

ABLEISM IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

The history of higher education across North America is deeply rooted in ableist perspectives and practices. Jay Dolmage (2017, 3) writes about this extensively in his book *Academic Ableism*, noting that “disability has always been constructed as the inverse or opposite of higher education.” Dolmage argues that “academia exhibits and perpetuates a form of structural ableism” (53) while “mandat[ing] able-bodiedness and able-mindedness, as well as other forms of social and communicative hyperability” (7). People with disabilities are imagined as an exception rather than as the ideal type of body and mind, and their needs are addressed as exceptions that are handled on an individual basis. The academic environment is neither designed nor constructed to acknowledge the possibility of anyone with disabilities, except as necessary to remain in compliance with legal mandates. Thus “disability is ensconced as an individual trouble that makes a person not fully at one with the workings of university life” (Titchkosky 2011, 13). Additionally, higher education “relies heavily on presenting an intellectual, coherent, and productive identity that emerges as distinctive and distinguished” (Alshammari 2017, 31), and as a result, any form of “disability is imagined as a deficit and acted upon as such” (Titchkosky 2011, 55). This individual deficit model remains the “dominant discourse around disability, perpetuating notions that disabled academics are less productive and less able to perform and function well in the academy” (Waterfield, Beagan, and Weinberg 2018, 337). Thus, academia positions disabled people as “less than” the ideal norm and places undue burdens upon them to conform to an imagined ideal that fails to acknowledge differences in minds and bodies.

The deficit model of disability, which frames disability as a medically certifiable “problem” to be “solved” in some manner, leads to a response known as the “retrofit” in which existing structures and environments are retrofitted to comply with the letter of the law. For example, adding a ramp and electronic door to an older building may assist a select group of individuals in some way, yet the retrofit itself can be yet another form of exclusion (consider, for example, the “accessible” entrance that is hidden in the back corner of a building). Retrofits “address inequities and inaccessibility, but do so in ways that reinforce ableism” because “these retrofits are not designed for people to live and thrive with a disability, but rather to make the disability go away” (Dolmage 2017, 70). Retrofits aim to “solve” the “problem” of a disability, but in order to create a “solution,” the “problem” must be both named and clearly identified in such a way

that it can be easily addressed. In this way, the retrofit also serves to set apart any person who might need to make such a request. More significantly, retrofitting fails to address the structural inequalities that created the need for such accommodations in the first place. Dolmage observes, “The fact is, too often we react to diversity instead of planning for it” (78). This reaction often becomes defensive in nature, protecting the institution from legal action or “problem” employees, and focusing solely on retrofitting the environment in some way, because, after all, “. . . the keyword of the retrofit is compliance” (80).

In a similar manner, academic libraries have a long history of considering the needs of a wide variety of patrons, including those with disabilities, but much of this work follows the retrofitting model in an attempt to make existing information, services, and spaces more accessible. Libraries have done significant work toward making information accessible for all, particularly in regards to web and digital accessibility, yet the library literature largely looks outward toward the needs of library users and only minimally examines the lived experiences of disabled library workers. In a content analysis of library literature, Hill (2013, 139) found that “significant literature themes begin and end with a focus on electronic accessibility,” with a primary focus on visual challenges representing 42 percent of the literature, whereas discussions of learning or physical disabilities were “extremely rare” (140). Within the library literature, the conception of disabilities is quite narrow, and the main area of concern is the “services libraries are providing, what they need to improve upon, and the perception of those services,” rather than examining the perceptions of disabilities within libraries (138). More recent articles continue this trend of looking outward toward patron experiences, such as articles discussing supporting patrons with disabilities through library staff training (Brannen, Milewski, and Mack 2017) or creating accessible library tutorials (Webb and Hoover 2015). Even the few articles that encourage the revision of library conceptions of disability still focus largely on patron access to spaces or services (Pionke 2017). Recent articles by Kumbier and Starkey (2016), Schomberg (2018), and Oud (2018) remain outstanding exceptions. Kumbier and Starkey (2016) examine both libraries and the profession itself to argue for a reconception of access centered around equity and social justice. They contend that “the professional literature treats accessibility mostly as a matter of finding the right solutions to problems faced by patrons with disabilities who navigate our systems and access our materials” (477) but does little to address “the larger structural, systemic, or social transformations that could enable access for people with disabilities” (478). Schomberg (2018, 112) rightly observes that “when we talk about in/accessibility in libraries, we’re not talking about things that others experience; we’re talking about ourselves.” Schomberg focuses largely on the experiences of library workers with disabilities and offers

suggestions for expanding current conceptions of disabilities to support employees who may or may not have disclosed a disability or identify as disabled. Oud (2018) examines the workplace experiences of Canadian librarians with disabilities to determine what factors might contribute to or detract from their job satisfaction. Unfortunately, articles such as those by Kumbier and Starkey, Schomberg, and Oud remain exceptions within the library literature, which by and large fails to examine the impacts of ableism and structural oppression for library employees with disabilities. This lack of examination and acknowledgement continues the erasure of disabled library workers and contributes to their precarity in the workplace.

RESILIENCE, VOCATIONAL AWE, AND PROFESSIONALISM

Across higher education, recent conversations around student resilience have led to a growing number of professional-development opportunities for faculty and staff claiming to promote and build resilience (see, e.g., Gray 2015; Antista 2018; see also the UCLA Campus and Student Resilience website, <https://www.resilience.ucla.edu/>). This trend demonstrates the increased importance and value placed upon resilience training within higher education. While learning to become more resilient might seem harmless at first, and even potentially beneficial, these conversations prove troublesome or harmful for those who are already trying to survive expectations that don't fit their own reality and those who are experiencing systematic oppression and marginalization.

Originating in conversations around environmental adaptability, but gaining prominence across education from Carol Dweck's research on mindsets, resilience encourages individuals to face challenges with a "positive" attitude that is "beneficial for development," and to view themselves, their situations, and those around them as subject to change, rather than being fixed and permanent (Yeager and Dweck 2012, 303). For example, viewing oneself as "not good at this," a fixed mindset, can inhibit and break down the learning process, whereas viewing oneself as "new to this topic" would help individuals see themselves as capable of learning, thus demonstrating a growth mindset. While some educators find Dweck's research helpful for framing students' response to learning, when resilience is brought into the conversation as a significant aspect of a growth mindset, the individual always carries the burden of responding "positively" to any and all challenges. Such conversations fail to acknowledge the systemic inequities that place a heavier burden upon those who are already oppressed, marginalized, and/or struggling in some way (Berg, Galvan, and Tewell 2018). In this way, resilience "disregards the system that is making people unwell" and instead focuses on an individual-deficit model, where those who struggle in some way are seen as problematic for not being adequately resilient (Diprose 2014, 49).

Resilience discourse is broadly intended to "prevent distress and dis-

ability in all members of a given population” (Aubrecht 2012, 71), but in doing so, it creates a “toxic ideal” that is “grounded in celebratory accounts of [individual] hardships and adversity” (Simard-Gagnon 2016, 220). These discourses around resilience also serve to “reproduce notions of difference, disability and distress as difficulties to be both renounced and exploited,” which renders promoting resilience antithetical to inclusion and accessibility (Aubrecht 2012, 67). When systems and inequities are causing harm, the burden of change should not be placed upon individuals. Instead systematic change is necessary.

Within libraries, the language used to talk about professionalism is also problematic and exclusive and mirrors many of the conversations around resilience. Librarians, for instance, demonstrate considerable concern over their professional identity and status, as seen in the variety of literature investigating related topics such as librarian stereotypes (Pagowsky and DeFrain 2014; Pagowsky and Rigby 2014; Jennings 2016) or faculty status (Hosburgh 2011; Galbraith, Garrison, and Hales 2016; Walters 2016). Library literature also examines professionalization, often focusing on establishing criteria for a profession and determining whether or not librarianship meets those criteria (Hicks 2014; Seminelli 2016). While the American Library Association (ALA) lists “professionalism” among its core values of librarianship (ALA 2006), the meaning of this core value remains contested and highly problematic. Drabinski (2016, 605) notes that “professionalism, among other effects, produces and inscribes inequities in the library workforce,” in part because “the production of hierarchies infused with power and privilege is implicit in the professionalization process.” The argument that some library workers are “professional” must by its nature frame other library workers as nonprofessionals, so while it includes some, it also excludes others. In a profession with a long history of upholding hegemonic values, the discourse around professionalism often fails to interrogate underlying assumptions and thus serves to promote a white, heteronormative, ableist perspective where the existence of any “professional” whose body or mind does not represent this default is erased by an “ideal” model of what it means to be professional.

The concept of “vocational awe” within librarianship, like professionalism, is also based upon unacknowledged expectations of normative bodies and minds and thus reinforces this process of displacing those who do not represent the “ideal” professional. Vocational awe, a phrase coined by Fobazi Ettarh (2018), “refers to the set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that result in beliefs that libraries as institutions are inherently good and sacred, and therefore beyond critique.” According to Ettarh, “this sets up an expectation that any failure of libraries is largely the fault of individuals failing to live up to the ideals of the profession, rather than understanding that the library as an institution is fundamentally flawed.” Vocational awe places an undue

burden upon individual library workers to meet professional ideals while simultaneously rendering a critique of those ideals as unprofessional and unwelcome. This failure to “acknowledge the library as a flawed institution” continues the marginalization of those who are already oppressed and marginalized, who for the most part are people of color and people with disabilities (Ettarh 2018).

Within libraries, then, vocational awe and conversations around professionalism promote an ableist perspective that excludes the lived experiences of those with disabilities by creating barriers to inclusion. Furthermore, the lack of diversity in the profession reflects the ways in which those who are marginalized remain so. Despite diversity initiatives, librarianship remains a predominantly (87 percent) white profession (ALA Office for Research and Statistics 2012), and current statistics suggest that in the United States, employment of people with disabilities within libraries at the rate of 3 percent (ALA 2017) falls significantly short of being representative of the disabled US population, which the Census Bureau estimates at around 19 percent (US Census Bureau 2012). Unfortunately, “no profession becomes and remains this homogenous by accident” (Morales, Knowles, and Bourg 2014). The library profession reinforces whiteness, heteronormativity, and ableism, and in doing so, is contributing to the precarity of library workers and causing harm.

PRECARITY IN THE LIBRARY WORKPLACE

The word *precarity* has its origins in the Latin word *precārius*, meaning “given as a favour” or “depending on the favour of another,” and continues to retain some of this original meaning as well as a sense of vulnerability “to the will or decision of others.”¹ In the workplace, this vulnerability is reflected in unstable and unprotected work, which may result in low compensation, few boundaries between work and personal life, frequent relocation, and anxiety over finding and keeping work (Gill and Pratt 2008). While some academic librarians may be able to obtain tenure, other library workers remain in staff positions or in at-will employment situations that remain tenuous by their nature. In a survey of US research universities, Walters (2016) found that only 52 percent of librarians had some degree of faculty status, while 44 percent did not have any form of faculty status. The employment of library workers remains largely dependent on the will of others, and as the value of higher education and of libraries continue to come under question, library workers across a variety of employment situations are facing increased precarity in their workplaces. This precarity is increased further for those who may not fit the perceived white, hyperable norms of academia, and disabled library workers, who are often excluded from discussions regarding workplace diversity, are particularly at risk.

Price (2016) explains that precarity is not an individual situation but rather a systemic one, occurring when “certain inhabitants of a system

are designed to be debilitated or broken,” and “this debilitation remains obscure, that is, willfully hard to explain.” In a system that tends to view disabled employees through a deficit model while perpetuating a hyperable norm, the existence of disability is continually erased and thus remains unaddressed. Higher education perpetuates a system that requires individuals to reveal their specific condition or diagnosis, identify predictable solutions, and fully maintain the ability to perform the functions of their position, yet that system neglects to acknowledge the risks and complexities associated with disclosing a disability. Although most institutions have outlined a process to accommodate disabilities in the workplace, that process remains largely unclear, inconsistent, and based upon legal compliance (Price et al. 2017). This lack of a clear and consistent accommodations process “suggests that disability is viewed as contradictory, aberrant—an academic is expected to be not disabled” (Waterfield, Beagan, and Weinberg 2018, 342). So even though such processes may be intended to provide support, in application they only help some while creating additional barriers for many others. These additional systems and processes required of disabled library workers instead contribute further to their workplace precarity.

ADA AND REASONABLE ACCOMMODATIONS

In the United States, disability and accommodation practices and policies within higher education are largely informed by legal requirements, such as those put forth in the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which was signed into law on July 26, 1990. The ADA defines *disability* “as a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment” (US Department of Justice, n.d.). While the stated purpose of the ADA is to “provide a clear and comprehensive national mandate for the elimination of discrimination against individuals with disabilities” (US Department of Justice 2009), the ADA and its deficit-model approach to disability instead pose and reinforce barriers to access. The ADA “works on the assumption of a predictable series of events: identify a problem (imagined to be located in the body of a disabled person), figure out an accommodation then retrofit existing systems to put this accommodation in place” (Kerschbaum et al. 2017, 322). The problem with this process is that “such linearity doesn’t work well for any kind of disability, no matter how stable that disability might seem to be,” and “if the disability in question is highly stigmatized (e.g., autism, borderline personality disorder) or unpredictable (e.g., many chronic illnesses that affect energy and cognition), it is not simply a poor fit for the ADA model; it doesn’t fit at all” (Kerschbaum et al. 2017, 322). Many disabilities are unpredictable in their nature, yet the ADA demands that individuals predict what they will need and when

in order to request an accommodation, when in fact such determinations can prove difficult even for medical practitioners.

The ADA process simultaneously demands that all accommodations also be “reasonable” in nature (US Department of Justice 2009), another determination that proves difficult in application. For employees, the ADA mandates “reasonable accommodations” that do not present an “undue hardship” to the employer, while requiring that the employee remain able to complete the “essential functions” of the position (US Department of Justice 2009). Though “reasonable” on the surface, in application, however, employees must itemize their disabilities, determine (guess) what might seem reasonable to their employer, and then hope that no one decides that this request means the employee is no longer able to perform in their current line of work. Thus, employees must maintain a “razor-thin balance” between “being disabled ‘enough’” to make the request in the first place, but not so disabled as to be unable to perform the “essential functions” of the position or require accommodations that might be determined to be burdensome (Price 2011, 109). To further complicate the process of seeking accommodations, offices dedicated to faculty and staff who seek accommodations are rare. Thus, the attempt to determine the proper process for accommodation may require faculty and staff to disclose any disabilities to multiple parties (Price et al. 2017). This lack of a formalized accommodation process for academic employees is yet another way in which academia frames disability as “contradictory” or “aberrant” to the expected norms for academic bodies and minds (Waterfield, Beagan, and Weinberg 2018, 342).

DISCLOSURE AS RISK MANAGEMENT

Determining whom to talk to is not the last hurdle in the accommodations process. In fact, the act of disclosure itself poses numerous risks, such as loss of privacy, fear of stigma, loss of employment and subsequent loss of health insurance, along with the potential for additional discrimination based on stereotypes and ableist biases (Kerschbaum et al. 2017). Some disabilities, such as mental or cognitive, may be considered less socially acceptable and therefore may be associated with additional stereotypes and stigma, creating further complexity and risk in the disclosure process. Even those in charge of the accommodations process, such as a department chair or a designated person in human resources, may be lacking in an understanding of disabilities and may reinforce stereotypes and negative perspectives. In a study of faculty members with mental disabilities, Price and her coauthors (2017) found that disclosure was perceived as “risky or dangerous in some way,” with this sense of risk cited as the “most prevalent rationale” for not requesting accommodations. Price also found that this sense of risk proved true for employees requesting accommodation, who reported “being further stigmatized” after the request was made

(Price 2011, 118). Individuals may also worry that “by admitting to health conditions or disabilities they may be worsening their chances for employment” (Brown and Leigh 2018, 987). Additionally, some disabilities (such as learning disabilities or chronic illnesses) “frequently are seen as lacking legitimacy or are perceived as excuses” (Evans 2017, 130). When any disability is seen as lacking authenticity, “it becomes more challenging to obtain needed, legally mandated accommodations, and differences in performance may be attributed to laziness or lack of effort rather than seen as the consequences of the disability” (Evans 2017, 130).

Given the potential hazards of disclosure, any disclosure of disability “operates as a type of *risk management*” requiring “assessment and prioritization of risk in a given context” (Wood 2017, 85). Rather than assume the risks associated with disclosure, individuals may instead conceal their disability or disabilities in an act known as “passing.” Yet “passing as a non-disabled person requires effort, dedication and the ability to manipulate others’ perception of you,” and this strenuous effort can easily become “yet another duty to carry out” in order to maintain one’s position (Alshammari 2017, 32). Wood (2017) observed two additional strategies employed in response to the risks associated with disclosure. Rather than accepting the risk, individuals may instead opt for “selective disclosure” in which a condition associated with minimal stigma (e.g., herniated discs) is shared in order to receive some form of accommodations (89). A second strategy, called “strategic genericism,” involves revealing disability status without revealing any details as to the specific type of disability (88). Yet as with passing, these strategies too require a certain amount of energy to maintain the delicate balance between revealing enough details to obtain accommodations without revealing so much that one is stigmatized. This creates a “disclosure conundrum” in which a person needs to disclose, but “the act of disclosure itself may bring about stigmatization and retaliation” (Price 2011, 118). A study of the workplace experiences of academic librarians in Canada revealed that 68 percent of disabled respondents had not requested accommodation, with 71 percent indicating they feared accommodations would have a negative impact on their job. Of those librarians who had requested accommodations, 75 percent acknowledged some form of negative consequence from the process (Oud 2018, 9).

These risk factors and complexities show clearly situations in which people with disabilities choose to avoid disclosure and the accommodations process altogether. In a research study focusing on the experiences of disabled faculty, a participant explained that she “decided to pay for most of her own accommodations herself” rather than deal with a complicated disclosure and accommodations process (Price 2016). Price notes that “using personal resources to achieve accommodations” also emerged as a theme in a study of faculty with mental disabilities, indicating that this approach to managing the risk of disclosure is not a singular event.

Instead, paying for one's own accommodations, or providing them for oneself outside of the official channels, becomes yet another risk-management strategy.

REINFORCING PRECARITY

The common perception is that the ADA protects those with disabilities. However, an examination of the success of legal suits against employers indicates the exact opposite. In the United States, the courts have a long history of throwing out cases at the summary-judgment stage, meaning that in its initial stages, the case is determined to be without merit, and in the remaining cases, the courts by and large decide in favor of the employer (O'Brien 2002, 163). Within higher education, disabled faculty also lose their ADA cases at the summary-judgement stage, at the rate of 93 percent (Price 2011, 109–11). Unfortunately, “employers do not rise enthusiastically to the challenge of access, nor do the courts support plaintiffs’ efforts to gain access through legal channels” (Price 2011, 118). While the ADA does provide some protections, mere legal compliance should only serve as the bare minimum, rather than the extent of support that is provided. Clearly the legal system continues to work against those with disabilities, and the seemingly simple act of requesting accommodations seems to simultaneously expose a person to a myriad of risks that may cause both personal and professional harm, reinforcing the precarity that already exists for anyone with disabilities. The system designed to ensure ADA compliance, then, creates barriers for those who might need accommodations, and reinforces an ableist norm that leaves little room for human variance or difference.

ELIMINATING BARRIERS

Instead of doling out accommodations to those who are brave enough to request them, institutions need to create new approaches to inclusion and develop an environment that allows “whomever to participate in that community as seamlessly as everyone else without making it apparent that anything had to happen— that anything had to be changed or manipulated to make it accessible” (Breneman et al. 2017, 353–54). Rather than continuing to adhere to an accommodations process that views disability as a problem in need of a solution, and perpetuating an ableist professional ideal that places responsibility on the individual to be resilient, libraries and library workers need to redefine professionalism, minimize the stigma associated with any type of disability, and reduce precarity for disabled library employees. Accessibility and disability need to be understood as more than an individual issue, or an issue related to a specified group of people such as the visually impaired, but instead as a call for “collective action or exploration” (Titchkosky 2011, 12). Additionally, the responsibility for this collective exploration must be shared rather than falling upon a

single person or those who are disabled. By moving away from an individual-deficit model, libraries and library workers can focus on a social-justice approach to disability that focuses on equity and inclusion for all.

Accessibility is a social issue, and one for all employees, not just some. Rather than upholding the deficit model of disability by demanding of disabled library workers, “What’s wrong with you? How long is it going to last?” those working within libraries need to instead ask all employees questions like “Can you show me what you can do or what you hope for” (Breneman et al. 2017, 352). Price observes that posing the question “*What do you need?*” is an important part of the micropractice of accessibility” for all employees (Price 2011, 134). This simple question—“What do you need?”—signals support and a willingness to be flexible and collaborate, whether that question is posed to a new employee or to a candidate visiting campus for an interview. When asked of all employees, such a question no longer requires employees with disabilities to single themselves out and accept the myriad of risks associated with disclosure, but instead assumes (correctly) that all employees have a variety of needs. For example, workplace options typically offered as accommodations, such as ergonomic office furniture, flexible schedules, regular breaks throughout the workday, minimal fluorescent lighting, the ability to occasionally work from home, an office with a door, and advance notice of meetings and agendas, may help those with disabilities, but these workplace adaptations could also benefit many other employees, such as primary caregivers. When libraries create a culture and environment that is “flexible, multimodal, and responsive to feedback” (Price 2011, 130), they can serve the needs of all who work there, not just those who ask for accommodations.

When considering accessibility and inclusion, libraries still need to look beyond those who come into library spaces, take advantage of library services, and access and use library resources. Those who work within libraries need to become stronger allies for their co-workers who help make all of those spaces, services, and resources possible. Libraries must be accessible to both their users and their employees, for to do otherwise would send the wrong message and indicate that access and inclusion are only meant for some and not others. Instead, library workers need to actively work to break down ableist practices and create a “transformation of consciousness regarding access and disabled people” (Titchkosky 2011, 10). That transformation of consciousness requires the normalization of “body and performance differences, in our workplace policies and practices, as well as in the language we use to describe disability” (Schomberg 2018, 117). Libraries need to create an environment “in which disability does not need to be denied or hidden or tokenized or erased” (Dolmage 2017, 190) but is instead considered as another facet of human diversity. Trainings and workshops alone are not the answer to the existing structural inequities within higher education and academic libraries. These structural

issues must be addressed with structural change that considers the “norms, patterns, interrelationships, and contingencies that can lock any organization into decades-old dynamics of exclusionary behavior,” and undertakes the dissolution of ableism and other forms of oppression (Golom 2018). This work can only happen within academic libraries by finding “ways to get stakeholders in higher education to engage with, understand, and take action to address racism, classism, sexism, transphobia, ableism, and other structural inequalities, biases, and the range of harmful practices they allow” (Dolmage 2017, 39). Failure to address these harmful practices will only continue reinforcing them, and will prevent libraries from promoting social justice and creating a culture of inclusion and equity.

NOTE

1. *OED Online*, s.v. “precarious (*adj.*), accessed April 4, 2018, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/149548>.

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