

Crash Course in Library Services to People with Disabilities

Ann Roberts and Richard J. Smith. *Crash Course in Library Services to People with Disabilities*. Santa Barbara, CA/Denver, CO/Oxford, England: Libraries Unlimited, 2010. 159 pp. \$30.00. Paperback. ISBN: 9781591587675.

Despite the unfortunate words “crash course,” *Crash Course in Library Services to People with Disabilities* begins by explaining its title. Patrons with various physical or mental challenges are not “disabled people,” which makes the disability the most important thing, but people who have or suffer from disabilities. The authors spend the introduction and the first part of chapter 1 on this point. Seeing these individuals as persons first and foremost is an important ingredient in providing successful library services to these patrons. The book aims to provide practical information and resources to libraries that lack services for patrons with disabilities, partly by using the work of some libraries as models. There are six chapters. The first two cover general topics and issues related to serving patrons with disabilities. Chapters 3-5 concern specific services to different populations, and a concluding chapter summarizes the book. An appendix provides information on resources for libraries, and a second appendix offers sample forms for libraries to use.

In the first chapter, “Taking Stock,” the authors first challenge librarians to examine their attitudes toward people with disabilities. Next, the authors go straight into planning for library services to people with disabilities. The chapter covers a wide array of topics, including legal and related matters, such as the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act and the American Library Association’s policy regarding services for people with disabilities. It offers specific descriptions of issues for libraries in terms of collections, services, accommodations, etc. There are many specific suggestions about, for instance, the appropriate width of library doors and the conditions under which a service animal may be excluded from the library.

Chapter 2, entitled “Learn by Example,” covers a wide array of topics paired with good library examples to follow. It begins with a discussion of where to get statistics to build the case for making a library more accessible, including the decennial census long form. This is followed by several other topics, and for most of them the authors describe a library as an example of the recommendation. For example, when describing the idea of “in-home library services,” the book presents the Chelsea District Library in Chelsea, MI, which offers several programs for seniors and home delivery service. The authors then consider how to market in-home library services and the necessary screening process for employees and volunteers who are involved in providing these services. In an abrupt change of subject, which is common in this book, the authors talk about the desires of those with disabilities to have video games that are accessible. After several paragraphs, the authors state that librarians who are seeking to engage this population can offer gaming as attractive programming, including “Wii-habilitation.”

Turning to a topic relevant to almost all libraries, chapter 3 looks at “Assistive Technology and Total Access.” The authors introduce technology issues for those with disabilities. This is followed by a description of the “Alliance for Technology Access,” a network of individuals and organizations that address such issues. The authors offer considerations for communicating the availability of services, preparing the facility, and ensuring that access to the programs and services of the library is fair, equitable, and “should not, even unintentionally, screen out people with disabilities” (52). Considering technology more specifically, the book stresses the need for library computers to be usable by people with vision, hearing, dexterity, or other limitations. A key component of assistive technology is having staff and volunteers who understand how to use the technology. The chapter includes several self-assessment tests and forms to use in dealing with gaps. Next the authors discuss library website accessibility, including specific standards and tests to see how well a site measures up to the standards. As a “Pragmatic Approach,” the book considers the necessary balance between current needs of patrons, available resources, and anticipated needs of potential users. Concerning library computers, this reviewer has experienced multiple academic libraries with computers that are “locked” so that screen resolution,

mouse pointer size, and other factors are not adjustable, either by the patron or by the library staff, and that would be problematic for patrons with certain disabilities. It is why the authors recommend having at least one workstation that offers assistive technologies for patrons with varying needs. The chapter ends with a list of several common assistive technologies in libraries, from magnifying glasses to computer software and hardware.

Chapter 4, “Services to Baby Boomers and Older Adults,” begins by giving reasons that local libraries should be courting older adults, especially the millions of baby boomers who want to stay active. Following a brief treatment of the changes that occur as adults age past fifty, the authors offer (ALA) guidelines for providing library and information services to older adults. Some of the recommendations relate to assistive technologies covered in chapter 3. The authors give particular attention to computer training for older adults and library websites, especially Web 2.0 social media. Some of these are simple, such as using 12- or 14-point fonts for body text on web pages. The book frequently points to good examples, and for this point it offers <http://www.wiltonlibrary.org/senior>. Several pages are devoted to offering (electronic) games, such as the Wii, as part of library programs for senior adults. Some academic libraries have embraced offering the Wii for the student body, but Indiana State University at Terre Haute also seeks to engage seniors in the community with the Wii. The chapter also offers programming ideas to improve the physical and mental health of senior adults, and describes options for the blind such as audio books.

The last major subject covered in the book is “Library Services to Persons with Mental and Learning Disabilities” (chapter 5). The chapter offers a brief introduction to these illnesses, but urges those with a regular patron with such a condition to get additional help. It also covers recommendations for offering services to the homeless, who may or may not have mental disabilities. Libraries increasingly have to deal with the homeless. Therefore, libraries need to develop policies that are fair to all, and the library staff should be trained in how to interact with the homeless. There is also a section on providing library services to people with dementia. The authors also describe the symptoms of various mental illnesses such as panic disorder, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia, and learning disabilities, such as dyslexia and ADHD. The three-page chapter 6, “Summing It All Up,” does exactly that, repeating the essential issues covered in preceding chapters.

This book is indeed a “crash course,” as it begins by giving a variety of tips without any meaningful context or any apparent logical order. Chapter 1 is more like a “Frequently Asked Questions” web page than a structured approach to this subject. Readers may want to read chapters 2-5 and then come back to chapter 1 again, once they have more information to use in understanding what the authors suggest. One of the issues that the book touches on is that having services and technology in place does not mean that people with disabilities will know about them or use them. As the reviewer has seen, if a patron who needs accessibility services that are not available comes into the library, there is not much a librarian can do. So, as the authors urge, librarians need to anticipate their patrons’ current and potential needs and plan to meet those needs.

This book will be helpful primarily to librarians in public libraries, which serve a wide array of patrons. Academic and special libraries are less likely to encounter many of these issues. For librarians in these types of libraries, chapters 1 and 3 will be of most help. The book would have been a better resource if it had addressed more issues that are relevant to all libraries or that are particularly significant in academic and special libraries. Theological libraries will find chapter 1 helpful in planning and chapter 3 and, to some extent, chapter 4 useful as well. Chapter 3 offers them recommendations for making the collection more accessible to persons with various disabilities, and this is relevant with the beginning of chapter 4 on serving senior adults. Both students and clergy may need assistive technology due to impaired vision, not least from aging, or other physical challenges. This need could be especially acute if patrons need to access concordances or resources related to Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic, or other ancient languages, as these tools generally use very small fonts. Overall, the book is helpful in providing pointers to resources to help libraries address the needs of persons with disabilities and for information and resources for such patrons.

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