



Museum Studies Programs and the Need for Training in Disability and Inclusion

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A Project Access White Paper
Art Beyond Sight



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By Nina Levent, Joan Muyskens Pursley, and Joseph Wapner

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In its landmark 2009 settlement agreement with the International Spy Museum, the United States Department of Justice (DOJ) found that “the Museum initially failed to implement means to ensure that people with disabilities have an equal opportunity to participate in and benefit from services, programs and activities offered to others.” Because of this, the DOJ determined that the Museum was not in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

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Public accommodations, according to the Settlement Agreement with the Museum, includes, but is not limited to, ensuring that “the content of exhibits, public programs, and other offerings are accessible and effectively communicated to individuals with disabilities making, where necessary, appropriate auxiliary aids and services available to ensure effective communication to individuals with hearing and vision impairments unless taking such steps would fundamentally alter the nature of the context of the exhibits, public programs and offerings or result in an undue burden.”

While there are many museums that provide excellent programs and services for people with diverse disabilities, they are not in the majority. This phenomenon may be partially attributed to a need for increased training in the fundamentals of accessibility for museum studies/museology students. The conclusion that there is both a need and an interest for this training is reflected by Art Beyond Sight’s (ABS) 2010 survey of 16 museum studies/museology programs in ten states. Responses support the idea that there may exist a widespread lack of solid coursework to adequately prepare emerging museum professionals to create and conduct accessible programs and exhibits. This information then points toward a potentially serious problem as new educators, curators, and exhibit designers enter the field without a full understanding of the ADA and subsequent legislation and how to meet or, better, exceed those requirements.

The ABS 2010 survey

For the 2010 survey, ABS partnered with Joseph Wapner, then a graduate student at the University of Washington, to take a closer look at the need for formal accessibility training for museum studies/museology students. ABS’s Nina Levent and Joan M. Pursley had noticed that the international conferences on Multimodal Approaches to Learning, cosponsored by ABS and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, attracted many students currently enrolled in museum studies programs. In addition, ABS’s professional development for museum staff draws many recent alumnae and young professionals. This led us to believe that they were not getting the training they wanted or needed in order to provide programs for diverse audiences, specifically, children and adults with disabilities.

Mr. Wapner shares ABS’s interest in increased access for the whole museum public, and ultimately in creating more inclusive and relevant public institutions. His interest is informed by his own background in the arts and museology, as well as his firsthand

museum experience as a visually impaired person. Mr. Wapner represents an engaged group within the museum profession — museum professionals who have a permanent or temporary disability, and/or have family members or friends with disabilities. As was made clear in a series of focus groups that ABS conducted, vision loss does not equate with loss of interest in art. Nor do other disabilities. Indeed, children on the Autism spectrum and adults with dementia enjoy and benefit richly from visits to art, science, and history museums when the staff is welcoming and knowledgeable about their needs.

Survey of 16 museum programs

Currently, there are approximately 150 museum studies and museology programs offered at the graduate and undergraduate levels in the United States. The focus of these programs may also differ greatly over a range of disciplines including a wide variety of specializations. The 2010 ABS survey was designed to begin to estimate to what extent students, instructors, and administrators of these diverse programs engage the subject of accessibility and inclusion for people with disabilities. This survey examined a sampling of 16 universities with active museum studies faculty and administrators. The following universities took part in our 2010 survey:

- American University
- Arizona State University
- Boston University
- Brown University
- City College of New York
- Drexel University
- New York University
- Tufts University
- George Washington University
- School of the Art Institute of Chicago
- University of Iowa
- University of Michigan
- University of Illinois
- Southern Illinois University
- Teachers College Columbia University
- University of Washington

No mandatory or elective courses offered

Of the sixteen universities with museum studies/museology programs that participated in this research, none offered mandatory or elective courses on accessibility and inclusion of adults and children with disabilities. Thirteen respondents (81 percent) stated the topic is covered in one or more class sessions; however, two do not cover it at all, while one stated it is “discussed in passing.” Four of the universities (25 percent) offer no courses or classes on Universal Design/Universal Design for Learning (multisensory learning). The extent of coverage among the others varied from “only peripherally” and “touched on briefly” to being “integral to the curriculum.” Some programs might benefit from updating their disability-related content. The Cooperstown Graduate Program, for example, began including such content back in 1960, and benefited from the expertise of an early faculty member who had a disability and authored an important text on this subject.

Limited student interaction with people with disabilities

Few of the participating universities featured programs for visitors with disabilities in their coursework. Ten (63 percent) of the respondents said that if students want to experience such programs, they must do so at their own effort. Twelve (75 percent) did not provide classroom opportunities for students to interact directly with visitors with disabilities, although some stated that young people with disabilities attend their universities, so students may be in classes with them. In addition, a number noted

that internships in museums expose their students to diverse audiences, including visitors with disabilities.

Interest in access and inclusive programming

When asked to rate their program's need for and interest in additional curricula on disabilities and inclusion on a scale of 1 to 7 (with 7 being the greatest need), 88 percent gave it a 5, 6 or 7; the remaining 12 percent checked 4. When asked to use the same scale for their perception of students' interest in programmatic accessibility for people with disabilities, the numbers were lower: only 44 percent estimated student interest as above average, i.e., at a 5, 6 or 7. Interestingly, when asked, "How, if at all, have your students shown interest in this topic?" respondents indicated that exposure to programs for people with disabilities creates interest.

How then do students choose to manifest interest in disability-related issues? On the subject of student disability engagement, Dr. Susan Frankenberg, Program Coordinator

for the Museum Studies Program at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, wrote: "Students have shown interest by proposing specific class and independent projects that address visitors with disabilities, by bringing up disability issues in discussions of both general museum practice and specific museums, and, by creating additional relationships with campus disability resource groups or through friends."

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Student engagement and disability programs

The suggestion that students having direct interaction with programs for disabled audiences creates interest is a position supported by some leaders in museum studies/museology programs today. An emerging viewpoint is that the opportunity to directly interact with people with disabilities, to consider their experiences as essential expertise, can be of significant value, and training of this nature may better equip students with the tools they will need to create more relevant programming.

Dr. Jean Brody, Director of the Online Arts Administration program at Drexel University has observed the importance of exposing her students to experience with disability-related issues, noting, "It's clear from student responses that looking at arts events and facilities from this perspective really opens their eyes. They are very interested in serving their communities better and would want to know more about how they can open their doors wider."

Another participant wrote that her students are interested "if they have a personal connection to someone with a disability." One respondent noted that students who are interested in working in children's museums are the most likely to "get interested in disabilities," while another stated that "students in the Museum Education Program demonstrate interest in serving all audiences as part of their commitment to excellence and equity."

Inclusivity training may well provide students with important tools for designing more effective and relevant programming. Further, it may be suggested that these future museum professionals are duty-bound as the entrusted stewards of our cultural heritage to embrace opportunities to better connect the public with program and exhibit content. This notion of museum professionals as caretakers of essential human experience for the whole public resonates in the words of Dr. Kris Morrissey, Director of the Museology Graduate Program at the University of Washington:

Museums have the honor and the responsibility of being basically curators of human experience—of places that we remember and figure out and understand who we are, what we’ve done, and where we’re going, which is a huge honor. The whole thing with connecting with communities or audiences with disabilities, I think, is that we can’t really understand the human experience if we don’t share those things that really matter. I think museums are places where we can learn to be better people, and if we connect to each other superficially then it is not going to help us. Museums are realizing that with many of the things we’ve studied from the outside, there’s a limit to what we can understand. When we go out into the community and find people from a wider range of perspectives, it’s grounded in a different kind of expertise. It’s a matter of understanding that authenticity comes from different kinds of experience.

Possible online and in-person formats

The ideal formats for most effectively offering disability training courses was briefly covered in the ABS survey as well: About half of the respondents recommended that they be offered in intensive one- or two-day workshop. Some, like the University of Washington, were open to piloting a variety of formats: one- or two-day workshops, a series of lectures on accessibility and inclusion, or even a course on audiences with disabilities. Others, however, felt it would be most useful as an online course, as continuing education courses, or as a summer school course. One suggested that curriculum materials feature reading lists for the students and teaching activities for the instructor that will enable the university to integrate the curriculum into existing courses.

Conclusion

A number of the museum studies programs that participated in the 2010 survey indicated that disability awareness and inclusion support many of their core values, such as public service. Dr. Morrissey noted the importance of disability and inclusion training because “the socially responsible, relevant museum will be guided by professionals who seek to represent the wide-ranging interests and needs of their richly diverse, pluralistic culture.”

If students’ and instructors’ interest in a subject exceeds the current level of formal instruction, then it is necessary to explore the subject more effectively. As future stewards of our vast wealth of arts and cultural property, newly emerging museum professionals must be equipped to connect vastly diverse audiences with programmatic content, and they must be mindful of doing so with an inclusive, equitable approach. This can be a difficult undertaking, and the more these new professionals are prepared to make informed decisions based on effective firsthand experience and awareness of best practices in serving the needs and preferences of people with disabilities, the more successful they are likely to be in achieving their mission.

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