ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGIES FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH PRINT DISABILITIES IN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

by

Ravonne A. Green

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APPROVED:

____________________________  __________________________
Diane N. Gillespie, Ed.D., Chair

__________________________  __________________________
Susan Asselin, Ph.D.  Jean B. Crockett, Ph.D.

__________________________  __________________________
Jimmie C. Fortune, Ph.D.  Virginia J. Reilly, Ph.D.

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This study identifies substantive issues and suggests guidelines for using assistive technology (AT) in academic libraries. The Delphi Technique was used with a panel of librarians, disability service providers, and AT experts to determine these issues and guidelines for AT services in academic libraries. There were 55 substantive issues identified by a panel of experts for providing appropriate AT in an academic library setting. Some of these issues included training opportunities, providing adequate funding for the purchase and maintenance of AT, funding for staff in-service training and training for individuals with disabilities, evaluation of AT services, and including individuals with disabilities in AT decision making. Accessibility and marketing issues also emerged.

A professional panel consisting of 12 library, AT, and disability services experts developed guidelines for these issues. The panel rated the desirability of the guidelines using a Likert-type scale (1= important, 2=relevant problem, 3= insignificantly relevant problem, and 4=no relevance). All issues and guidelines receiving two-thirds of the responding panelists’ ratings were included in the important and relevant categories.

It was predicted that if librarians plan AT services and training, and market AT services using a collaborative approach that would include librarians, faculty, staff and students with disabilities that AT services could be better provided for students with print disabilities. The panel suggested that funding issues may be resolved in some cases by working cooperatively with other departments and community agencies.
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Prelude to the Oracle

The computers had been shut down for the day. The lights were turned off and the stacks appeared to be empty. Mr. Owens inserted the hex key in the door just as someone on the other side breathlessly swung the door open. “Mr. Owens, I’m sure glad you’re still here. I ran all the way from the dorm,” Eric explained as he paused to catch his breath. “Mr. Owens, I’ve got a paper that is due first period in the morning. I didn’t turn in the outline but I’m going to do the paper anyway. I want to do it on the Civil War. Does this library have anything on the Civil War?”

Mr. Owens suppressed his urge to inform Eric that it was closing time and that he should not have waited until the last minute to write his paper. Mr. Owens was trying to decide how he could help Eric to limit his search as he removed the key from the door and turned on the lights.

It still had not occurred to Eric that he was asking anything out of the ordinary as he started toward the center of the library. Mr. Owens proceeded toward the elevator as Eric followed him. Eric’s shoes were untied as always and his crumpled shirt looked like he had slept in it and worn it for three days. His shirt tale flopped in the breeze and his hair looked like Hurricane Andrew had passed through that day.

Mr. Owens remembered the first time that he had encountered Eric. Eric had come in with a freshman developmental English orientation class. He had stayed in the back of the group and made loud noises and wise cracks during the entire session.
During this session Mr. Owens routinely mentioned that he had recently accepted the newly created special services librarian position and that he was responsible for assisting students with special needs. “There’s something else that I want to mention,” he said as he concluded. “One of the reasons that I enjoy my new job is because I can help other people now who are like me. When people see me, they do not notice that I have a disability because my disability is hidden.” He remembered the students’ penetrating stares and the stillness that had fallen over the group as he continued. I have dyslexia. When I was in school, I hated going to the library. I could not look books up in the card catalog. It was hard for me to write down the call numbers. Then when I was a freshman in college, I learned that my work-study assignment would be in the library. This turned out to be one of the best things that ever happened to me.

Mrs. Richards who was one of the librarians recognized that I was getting all of the books in the wrong place when she told me to shelve them. She called me in one day and talked to me and I told her that I had dyslexia. She said, “That’s interesting. My son has dyslexia.” She offered to help me and treated me like a son. I would have never made it through college if Mrs. Richards had not been there for me. We all need someone to unlock our potential sometimes. He pointed toward his office as the students were leaving and welcomed them to come and visit him individually if they needed extra help with assignments.

Like Eric, it is common for many students who have hidden disabilities to delay the inevitable because their previous library experience has been so frustrating and humiliating. Unlocking human potential in students with hidden disabilities sometimes
literally means unlocking the door at closing time and turning on the lights that have been
turned off by insensitive, uncaring, or perhaps just uninformed professionals.