Equitable Access for Blind, Visually Impaired, and Print-Disabled (BVIPD) Students in Online Learning: How Students, Faculty, Disability Services, and Academic Libraries Can Work Together to Bridge the Gap

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ABSTRACT

The panel presents a research project funded by an internal grant at the University of South Carolina (USC) investigating equity of access to information by Blind, Visually Impaired, and Print-Disabled (BVIPD) students. BVIPD students often experience inequitable access to information, including but not limited to a time gap in receiving course content that is otherwise more readily available to non-BVIPD students (Scott and Aquino, 2020). This is a social justice and human rights issue. The researchers will explore ways in which university Disability Service Offices (DSOs) can work with university libraries to maximize access to accessible content to BVIPD students. The BVIPD population is historically underserved by libraries (Bonnici et al., 2015; Epp, 2006; Copeland, 2011; Copeland, 2012; Copeland, 2023; Kawooya, 2023). Most published literature is not available to the BVIPD students, with only 5% of published works available in formats accessible to BVIPD learners (National Federation for the Blind, 2019). The study is designed to develop a Campus Accessibility Partnership model between DSOs and academic libraries. The overarching research question is: *How might DSOs and academic libraries better coordinate to effectively and efficiently serve BVIPD students?*

The presenters will share outcomes of phase one of the study, including a detailed review of literature, research design and preliminary results. Because it is essential to understand the perspectives and potential contributions of all stakeholders in developing a framework for improving equity of access and accessibility for BVIPD students, the researchers are also seeking faculty perspectives. Faculty includes all who teach semester-long courses, regardless of tenure or rank. The researchers will introduce the literature review, the methodological approach, and preliminary results. The session will continue with an interactive discussion with conference attendees, who will be invited to reflect on key concepts and the following questions:

1. What, if any, problems have students at your institution(s) experienced with receiving course content in accessible formats?
2. In working with DSOs to ensure BVIPD students receive materials in accessible formats in a timely manner, what, if any, barriers do you experience?
3. What role(s) do you play to facilitate greater equity of access for BVIPD students?
4. What is your knowledge and awareness of your students' experiences with your campus DSO?
5. What formats of accessible course content does your campus provide as accommodations to BVIPD students?
6. If DSOs coordinated with academic libraries to adopt practices for saving accessible format materials for future use, what impact do you think this would have?

The theoretical framework is Jaeger and Burnett's (2010) multi-level information worlds theory. In this framework, information worlds have structural and behavioral implications, in that social constructs (such as the value ascribed to disability and accessibility) and societal structures/infrastructures (such as law) directly and reciprocally inform one another. Information worlds "provides a framework by which to simultaneously examine information behavior at both the immediate and the broader social levels" (Jaeger and Burnett, 2010, p. 1). The study will analyze five interconnected concepts of information worlds theory: *social norms*; *social types*; *information value*; *information behavior*; and *boundaries.*

The study employs a mixed method design using both qualitative methods (interviews with DSO staff, academic librarians, and BVIPD students) and a quantitative method (survey-questionnaire with instructors). Prior to the design and execution of the questionnaires, the research team will do extensive literature review and preliminary analysis of the relevant trends using the University of South Carolina's Social Media Insight Lab. Any news insights gleaned from both sources may lead to changes to the instructor questionnaire. The presenters will share the research design and preliminary results from the literature review and Social Media Insight Lab data.

Conference participants will work in groups to reflect upon the questions above. Understanding the lived experiences of faculty working with BVIPD populations will help begin to bridge the gap experienced by these marginalized students by identifying strengths and failures of current policies and procedures between DSOs, academic libraries and librarians, and faculty. Discussions among library and information science (LIS) faculty will contribute significantly to developing a partnership model that serves the needs of all stakeholders in ensuring equity of access and accessibility for BVIPD students. They will also steer future efforts to reduce the inequalities experienced by BVIPD students. Faculty interact with students of all abilities on a more regular basis. Accordingly, faculty can offer their insights from working with BVIPD students, DSO staff, and academic librarians. The primary goal of the panel is to raise awareness for accessibility issues faced by BVIPD students and facilitate a dialogue amongst educators. Ultimately, bridging gaps in understanding the needs of BVIPD students and the roles faculty, DSOs, and academic librarians can and should play in fulfilling these needs can impact equitable access to education. Equitable access to education impacts BVIPD students' likelihood of academic success, subsequent employment, income earning potential, and ability to enjoy a full life experience.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

academic libraries; online learning; social justice; information rights; library technology systems; disabilities; visual impairments.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

accessibility; disability; visual impairment; print disability; LIS education and practice.

PANELISTS

Dick Kawooya
Dr. Dick Kawooya's current research interests focus on the role of information (intellectual property) in fostering innovation. He is specifically looking at the role and impact of intellectual property rights (IPRs) in the exchange of innovation between formal institutions (universities, research centers, libraries, etc.) and informal businesses or sectors in Africa. Kawooya's research interests fit the broad theme of access and flow of information. He has particular interest in the ethical and legal barriers to information access and flows often with the library institution as the backdrop.

Eric P. Robinson
Dr. Eric P. Robinson is an Associate Professor in the School of Journalism and Mass Communications at the University of South Carolina. Dr. Robinson specializes in media and internet law and ethics, including attendant copyright issues. He was appointed to the Copyright and Intellectual Property Committee of the New York City Bar Association (2001–2003) and was a member of the Intellectual Property Committee of the University of South Carolina (2018–2021; chair, 2020-2021). Dr. Robinson formerly served as co-director of the Press Law and Democracy Project at LSU's Manship School of Mass Communication. He is also an attorney with more than 20 years of experience in media and internet law.

Clayton A. Copeland
Dr. Clayton A. Copeland is the director of the Laboratory for Leadership in Equity of Access and Diversity (LLEAD) at the University of South Carolina's School of Information Science. Much of her research focuses upon equity of access to information for people with disabilities. Copeland also pursues research interests in universal design and Universal Design for Learning, literacy, facilities planning, technology, and materials and programming for children and young adults. She recently co-authored and edited *Disabilities and the Library Fostering Equity for Patrons and Staff with Differing Abilities*.

Brandy Fox
Brandy Fox is a MLIS candidate with the University of South Carolina's School of Information Science. She has completed a certificate in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. She is in the process of starting a non-profit devoted to reducing wait times and other accessibility barriers faced by students who require course materials in audio formats.

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