

ARISE Podcast # 086 Making a Better Library

Host:

Tania Anderson

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Guest:

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Syracuse University

Tania Anderson 0:05

Welcome to the ARISE Podcast. I'm Tania Anderson CEO at ARISE. And I have with me today, William Myhill, Director of Disability Access and the ADA Coordinator at Syracuse University. Welcome William.

William Myhill 0:18

Thank you so much Tania. It's a pleasure to be here.

Tania Anderson 0:21

So you have wear many hats up at Syracuse University. And can you tell me first about what your role is as the Director of Disability Access and Americans with Disability Act coordinator

William Myhill 0:34

Great question. Thank you. I have a small team and mighty team of three and we're in the Office of Diversity Inclusion, and we're proudly responsible for ensuring that all individuals whether they're students, their faculty, staff, and visitors to our campus have an inclusive and accessible experience. So we work with a wide variety of partners across campus to try and proactively

make sure things are accessible. And then often we have to be responsive and respond to the issues that arise that we weren't able to plan for in advance and be reactive, but that is part of our job.

Tania Anderson 1:09

And we're talking about probably physical access, but also access to materials. Maybe if a student needs this specific support in accessing a curriculum, that sort of thing.

William MyHill 1:20

That's true, but we're much more aware these days about thinking more broadly in terms of our spaces environmentally, sensorially, appropriate are helpful to people who might be neurodivergent. We're more thoughtful about ensuring that things are available to people who are hearing impaired or deaf blind or visually impaired. And and those things can be very different from what we actually need to do for physical access.

Tania Anderson 1:46

And that's a great point. And I'm really glad that you've got that broader focus. Can you give me some examples of maybe different changes you've made to space that involve things other than physical access?

William MyHill 1:59

Yes, absolutely. So it's not my specific initiative, but I'm a partner in some of the work that's being done by our Center for Disability and Inclusion, with our campus planning, design and construction team. We are now in the process of thinking

broadly about where we can create sensory friendly spaces, you know, in many of our buildings across campus, so people whether they're students, staff, or faculty have a place if they wish to retreat to get out of the fray, and to have a more pleasant experience. We are creating these types of spaces and we've done this in one particular residence hall, where we have a living learning community focused upon diversity and inclusion issues.

Tania Anderson 2:39

And, I would imagine that a sensory friendly space might be just a more quiet space is that what I'm hearing.

William MyHill 2:47

A quiet space without fluorescent lighting, adjustable lighting with sounds that are not computer controlled, so soundproof spaces, with fidgets that people can use with comfortable seating with things like this that make the space more easily comfortable for a variety of people.

Tania Anderson 3:02

And like so many accommodations that are for that were originally intended for people with a disability. I can see those spaces being welcomed and embraced by everyone.

William MyHill 3:15

Absolutely, there are certainly times I would like to not identify as neurodivergent where I need to have a more quiet space. I need to be out of the fray. I think we all do. So I think these spaces have a broader appeal.

Tania Anderson 3:29

Absolutely, and it's just another example like for example with curb cuts which originally were intended for people who might use a wheelchair but of course people who are pushing a stroller or use a bicycle they benefit from that as well. These, these so called accommodations for people with disabilities really benefit the wider community.

William MyHill 3:47

Absolutely. And sort of a similar initiative at our campus with our campus planning just construction and design team. They are now building lots of gender neutral, accessible restrooms across campus, so they're serving multiple purposes. They're meeting the needs of a wide diversity issue, a wide variety of diversity issues while ensuring an accessible space for people to use.

Tania Anderson 4:11

Wow. So, in addition to that really important role at the campus, you also teach and you're also a student. So tell me about those roles.

William MyHill 4:18

Yeah, thank you. So I have the pleasure of collaborating with our Information Studies school back in, originally back in 2010 on some research projects, where I was informing some library services around disability issues, and that led into taking on a course teaching a course for them on accessible Library and Information Services. They gave me the clean slate to design it as I wish it is a required course for those future librarians. I want

to go into media studies in terms of K through 12 librarianship. It's not required for people who go into public librarianship or academic librarianship. But what I've found over teaching over the last six years and having full classes sometimes four or five times a year, all of which sections I cannot teach, that they're primarily interested in public librarianship. And that really drew my attention to the fact that there's something needed in public librarianship around disability and accessibility awareness that I really hope to tap into.

Tania Anderson 5:24

And that leads to your research study that you're working on right now.

William MyHill 5:28

Yes, very much so. As a as a dissertating student in Cultural Foundations of Education with a focus on disability studies. My work is an intersection of disability studies and Library Information Studies. And I hope in part for example, to from this work, better inform my teaching and do better teaching of students who are future librarians. The primary focus of my research is understanding one stepping back for a moment we all can recognize I think that disability is not necessarily well understood by a lot of people in our in our world, and that ableism we're discriminating against people with disabilities is pretty prevalent, often arising not so much always from a lack of physical access. But from kind of what I think of as attitudinal barriers, the kinds of barriers that we have in our minds around disability that might overly medicalize and over overly problematize disability is something that's wrong. When I do not

believe that there is anything wrong with disability. I think it's a natural part of the human experience. So this study with that in mind is trying to tap into understanding what do librarians in the field, think about disability? What are their experiences serving patrons with disabilities? What are their programs for this population? And then similarly, I want to learn from patrons with disabilities, what their experiences have been to see if it aligns with what I'm learning from librarians. And a third piece to my studies is to look at the policies that libraries have in place around accessibility issues and to see what kind of language they're using because often times when we see language that is overly medicalized in its use, or focuses upon the problem being inheriting the person rather than perhaps in an environmental barrier, then that's going to shape attitude around our practice and librarianship. So I'm looking at those policy issues as well.

Tania Anderson 7:26

Wow. There's a lot to unpack there. Let me say that everything you're saying is completely consistent with ARISE and the independent living philosophy and because I couldn't agree with you more that a person with a disability it's, it is a natural experience, and I always think of it as as a continuum of ability. We all have strengths and weaknesses and it's society draws is arbitrary line, you're on one side, you have a disability, you're on the other side, you don't. When the reality is we're all going to be on each side of that line in different ways at different parts of our lives, whether we're born with a disability, we acquire one, we just simply age. And the other piece about disability that I find really interesting is that, sure there are disabilities that we can see but there's so many invisible disabilities or different just

sensitivities or issues, whatever that we all have that also shaped the way people interact with each other. And I'm really like what you said about medicalizing disability because it is a natural condition. It's not something to be fixed. There are people that might have a chromosomal deletion that results in a developmental disability. It's you can't fix that. It's not to be fixed. It's just the way they were born. And then we just have an environment supports to make sure that those folks are successful. That's just one of many many examples and and I am really interested in what you are finding, I think with the participation in your course which sounds like it's super popular, and then the extension of your research it I'm getting the impression that people who are studying to be librarians are really receptive to all of the work that you're exploring.

William MyHill 9:20

I think that's true. I think, a younger generation today that's going into librarianship seems to come across to me as having a very broad mindset when it comes to issues of inclusion and thinking broadly around disability and to give them credit, of course, they've grown up in a world where they've seen their peers with disabilities in their regular classes with them throughout their a K through 12 experience. They've had more of an inclusive experience. So I think that's a part of it. But I'm equally finding in the people I'm working with, I'm interviewing in the field, who are librarians that even though they may be seasoned Librarians of 20 or 30 years, the fact that they're interested in participating in work working with me, tells me that they too, have a very open mindset around these issues, and I'm learning from them. Things such as that they want to do better, they want to learn more and,

and so if there are ways that I can work with them, or collaborate with them, or provide findings that will inform their practice, and that's what I hope to do.

Tania Anderson 10:23

That's great. And I have a I have a very strong bias in favor of libraries. So I just make that disclosure. But my experience with libraries in particularly public libraries has been that it's always been a really welcoming space and that librarians are really determined to make sure that it's a welcoming community space, regardless of someone's identification as a person with a disability. So I'm not at all surprised that librarians would be very receptive to the work. And I'd like your your view on because libraries are a resource, really important resource for our community. Do you see them libraries being even a more important resource for people with disabilities?

William MyHill 11:09

When we think about where we've come since the beginning of the COVID pandemic, and we saw how libraries pivoted to provide services at the at their front doors, and to really rely heavily upon their their web based presence, I think we're seeing a shift where people with disabilities who may not have regular physical access of our library space, but do have a web based access are beginning to use those resources much more heavily than perhaps going into the library physically. Not not, of course, everybody disability but some people with disabilities. This is also benefiting, I believe a number of people in the senior citizen community who might have some issues around getting to a library, whether it be a transportation issue or a distance issue or

a mobility issue. So I think yes, I think libraries are becoming more important all the time in this respect. And as we move into this time in our world where misinformation abounds, libraries are to me a hallmark for trying to provide meaningful, accurate information and helping people learn how to navigate information so that they get the right information. So I think there's going to be an ongoing need for libraries in these two respects.

Tania Anderson 12:30

That makes a lot of sense and what do you what are your views on libraries as a community space and the value for people in community generally, but also people with disabilities in their communities?

William MyHill 12:44

Libraries, public libraries really have become community hubs in many respects, we look across our county here of Onondaga and really all the libraries host various programs for different age groups, different types of programming, some of it more disability focused, much of it just inclusive. And yes, these are gathering places. Many libraries have meeting rooms that they make available to the general public that want to have particular groups come together. So I, I certainly see libraries as being that just that a community hub, and pretty much functioning in a community as a place where people can gather. People can learn from one another.

Tania Anderson 13:28

Right. I think that's so true. What you're saying about the community space, and I just want to share just an anecdote. I have a close family member who has a developmental disability, and she uses her public library all the time and there are no barriers in that space for her she is welcomed. She is known she's encouraged to be independent. All the staff are patient. It's, it's she's got wonderful access to the information in the programs, but the attitudes there are so inclusive and so wonderful, that I just I hope every library is like that and I'm sure that you hope that as well.

William MyHill 14:13

I do hope that as well. And one of the things that we sometimes have to factor in also is the attitudes of other patrons which sometimes aren't so accepting. Especially if we have perhaps a young child or a person, maybe they are neurodivergent who might make some noises that are different from what other people expect in a library space. These can be disturbing to people, and yet they're just part of the human experience. So part of the librarians challenge, I think is to what extent do they have a responsibility or a role in educating the general public around disability issues or around being more inclusive in their own thought patterns? I don't know if there is a responsibility there. But patrons are a big part of these library environments. And they always have the most open ideas.

Tania Anderson 15:06

Right. Yeah, there's a lot to navigate there. And even just simply modeling the behavior that we'd like the other patrons to see I think would go a long ways towards that. Absolutely. So I want to

talk a little more specifically about when you talk about accessibility with libraries, and particularly with your study, what are some of the particular tools or conditions in the library that you're thinking about? What does accessibility look like in a library?

William MyHill 15:38

Well, there's certainly the programming piece. Are there programs that in some libraries, you will see programs that are specifically targeted towards serving a disability population, and that's fine those can be very, very useful. I am interested in seeing where we actually have programming that's more on the inclusive side, that doesn't separate people with disabilities into a separate program, but actually includes them in the mainstream programs, and then what's being done with those mainstream programs to make them more genuinely inclusive and accessible. If we're thinking about neurodivergent individuals, for example, having fewer people in a space can you know can go a long way. Having people be able to spread out a little bit or have their own designated spot so they can sit in having a place to retreat to that sensory friendly place. There are things that can be done around just general programming that can make it more inviting to people with hearing disabilities. So that's sort of one piece of it. I'm also really interested as we've been talking about the how we think about disability. As we were talking about issues of accessibility around the Americans with Disabilities Act, which has a very specific way of defining what we mean by disability. We have a Social Security Act. We have veterans programs and we have individuals with disabilities education actually have all these different ways we can kind of

construct what we mean by disability, and that if you don't fall into the right parameters, you don't get counted as eligible for service depending upon what the definition is. That's interesting to me because we have so many different ways of constructing disability that may or may not be all that helpful to us in terms of making it a more inclusive space. In fact, sometimes these eligibility criteria may push people away from services or rule people out from eligibility and I hope that we can think very broadly around disability when it comes to these types of issues, and move away from some of these legal definitions of disability that are very restrictive into a more open idea around what you had said earlier, the range of abilities that we all have thinking more broadly about that.

Tania Anderson 18:01

Right. So, I think we've sort of come full circle in terms of the work you're doing for the university, the work you're doing and teaching your study. That really the bottom line is that being inclusive for all folks, regardless of disability or really anything benefits our whole community in terms of enriching our experience, as people as members of this community, and having a an open mind and a welcoming attitude will carry us all far. And I'm a huge fan of libraries. I love the work that you're doing. I wish you the best and just thank you for doing this work.

William MyHill 18:42

Well, thank you and thank you for what you just shared in terms of your revision of this inclusiveness. I couldn't agree more and I couldn't say it any better than you just did.

Tania Anderson 18:51
Thanks so much.

William MyHill 18:52
Thank you

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