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The Practice Model for an Equitable Workplace Transition Program: Disability and Neurodiversity

Summary: The LIS program at DU[1], in partnership with the iSchool UofSC, CU Boulder Libraries, and UofSC Libraries, seek a $149,880 National Leadership (NLG) Planning grant for the two-year exploratory project that will lay the groundwork for a future equitable workplace transition program for recent LIS graduates with disabilities[2] and neurodiverse conditions. Working with a small sample of disabled and neurodiverse LIS graduates, the team will (1) explore participants' employment experiences during the MLIS program and upon graduation; (2) examine library managers' perceptions of and preparedness for working with disabled and neurodiverse employees; (3) examine peers' attitude toward working with disabled colleagues; (4) create guidelines for policy change (i.e., equitable and inclusive job advertisement, application, interviewing, and onboarding), and (5) develop a practice model for an equitable workplace transition program, integrating remote opportunities discovered during the pandemic. These goals will align with the NLG goal 1, objective 1.1, that is, creating replicable library programs and models that contribute to the development of the diverse workforce and increase employment equity. The practice model of an equitable workplace transition program will be replicable and transferrable. Grant applicants include scholars and practitioners, winners of multiple research, teaching, and service awards and leaders of library DEIA initiatives, who have worked in the area of DEIA, disability advocacy/workplace equity for many years, authoring articles, book chapters, editing special issues, co-founding SIGs, and developing OA resources in libraries.

Project Justification: Libraries have come a long way in being more inclusive of disabled and neurodiverse patrons, although no true inclusion of patrons can be achieved if they are not represented in the library workforce. Yet, these patrons are mostly served by non-disabled and neurotypical staff, a situation which gets little attention even in the context of diversity discourse. Employment rates for disabled and neurodiverse professionals remain persistently low while both recruitment and retention efforts fall short[3]. Yet, examples from the corporate world (e.g., the Microsoft recruitment of neurodiverse staff) show that in inclusive work environments, disabled and neurodiverse employees thrive, especially if employment support programs are in place[4]. Due to the fear of self-disclosure and discrimination, the exact percentage of disabled and neurodiverse students in LIS programs is unknown; however, many of them do not find LIS jobs commensurate with their qualifications and skills, if at all. Their resumes may not have a sufficiently strong employment history compared to that of non-disabled candidates; they may not get a chance at a job interview structured to their needs; cover letters by neurodiverse students may give away their condition through the peculiarities of style. This situation raises serious questions of inequity and exclusion, as well as ethical and moral concerns. LIS programs promise not only an equitable learning opportunity but also an equitable chance of job market preparedness to all. We help disabled and neurodiverse students complete the program through a combination of ADA accommodations and UDL[5]; yet, we do not level the playing field for future employment. While we add their tuitions to departmental revenue, we do not provide equitable practical training opportunities for them, and professors who accommodate disabled and neurodiverse students academically may be hesitant to give them job references. Despite the recent resurgence of studies on the experiences of librarians with disabilities[6], none of them focuses on recent graduates or the benefit of a strategic school-to-workplace transition programs for disabled and neurodiverse graduates. IMLS has previously funded impactful Project ENABLE, set to help librarians serve neurodiverse patrons; however, no project supporting employment equity for disabled and neurodiverse librarians has been implemented just yet.

Project Work Plan: Addressing this gap, the proposed two-year exploratory project will lay the groundwork for a future equitable workplace transition program through a multi-stage approach: *Year 1*: **(1) Participant interviews**: Six disabled or neurodiverse LIS professionals (three persons from each program), who graduated in the last five years and are not employed at the level of their qualifications, will be recruited through listservs of graduates (as a purposeful convenience sample) for in-person semi-structured interviews guided by phenomenology, which explores participants' lifeworlds through their own narratives (comp. $1,000 per person). Effort will be made to recruit candidates with different life experiences (e.g., physical disability; hidden disability; neurodiversity; developmental and learning disability; etc.) and intersectional identities (e.g., race, immigration status, gender identity) to receive as diverse perspectives as possible. Interviews will address basic demographic data and factual data about their MLIS program (e.g., selection of courses, specializations, internships, etc.); also, it will examine their employment

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experiences while in the program (e.g., work-study; research assistantships; internships; field placements, etc.) and their experiences with job hunting and employment, specifically, their perceptions and feelings; systemic and personal barriers to successful job seeking and employment in their own words; and their suggestions for employers on what should change in order for them to have a fulfilling career. **(2) Interviews with employers.** In-person semi-structured phenomenological interviews with two managers/representative from each library will be conducted to gain the employers' perspectives on hiring, supervising, and retaining individuals with disabilities in libraries (comp. $250 per person). The interviews will also seek insight into the mindset, perceptions, and attitudes of managers with HR responsibilities. **(3) The peer survey:** An online self-administered survey of library staff in two participating libraries will be run to gauge their views on working inclusively through scenario-based questions that will measure behaviors and responses of co-workers who collaborate with disabled and neurodiverse peers. *Year 2:* **(4) Policy analysis:** To complement people's perspectives, existing workplace policies, practices, and regulations will be analyzed based on the extant documentation from both libraries. The method of process policy evaluation will be employed to determine problems and gaps in current workplace policies and policy performance and to provide solutions and guidance to make these policies inclusive of and equitable to disabled and neurodiverse employees.

(5) Based on the analysis of results from four studies, **guidelines for changing workplace policies** and practices will be prepared, in close collaboration with both participants and managers and **(6) a practice model of an equitable workplace transition program** will be collaboratively built. Since it is a Planning grant and a qualitative study, talking to six LIS graduates is justified; however, the study is multi-stage and also involves four library managers and a substantial number of library staff/peers, thus generating sufficient data given the grant parameters and addressing the workplace holistically.

The Project Logic Model

Diversity Plan: The project is focused on the most neglected diversity group in the LIS workforce, which also creates a situation whereby many disabled and neurodiverse patrons do not see themselves represented among library staff. Project collaborators include both LIS faculty and practitioners, from different regions of the U.S. Disabled individuals are among this grant applicants and collaborators, contributing life experience and insight that cannot be taught. The project will be managed in close collaboration with disabled and neurodiverse participants, in line with "nothing about us without us." Advice and peer feedback will be solicited from researchers and practitioners with intersectional identities (e.g., disability and race, ethnicity, immigration status, gender identity, etc.), including library partners on this project; colleagues from Project Enable; and members of the ALISE "Disabilities in LIS" SIG, potentially including librarians and faculty from Indiana U, Emporia State U, CUNY, and UMD.

Results: The project will result in the *replicable and transferrable practice model of an equitable workplace transition program for disabled and neurodiverse MLIS graduates and an accompanying set of policy guidelines.* No such practice model for broader inclusion of disabled and neurodiverse employees currently exists in LIS; if successful, it could be a game-changer in securing equity and representativeness in the LIS workforce. The project will thus lay the groundwork for implementing an actual pilot program in the future, possibly funded by another Planning or Implementation IMLS grant. The developed model, policy documents, and research findings will be shared through the open-access (OA) project website and presented at professional conferences and through a series of online workshops. Research findings will be published in peer-reviewed journals, with a preference for OA venues. A major document will be a downloadable brochure with the model description and guidelines. Raw data with confidential information will not be shared to protect participants' privacy but research instruments will be shared widely and OA. ACRL and the "Disabilities in LIS" SIG at ALISE will be used to promote project outcomes.

Budget summary: DU: faculty costs: $16,483 (2 years); grad. students (220 hr @ $20/hr)+fringe (2 years): $19,279; comp. for participants: $3,500; IDC (50.7%): $34,609; **CU** travel honoraria for librarians: $4,000; **UofSC:** faculty costs (2 years): $8,388; comp. for participants: $3,500; UofSC travel honoraria for librarians: $4,000; IDC (49%): $20,398; grad. students 640hr @ $20/hr+fringe+insurance (2 years): $35,723 (no IDC); **total:** $149,880.
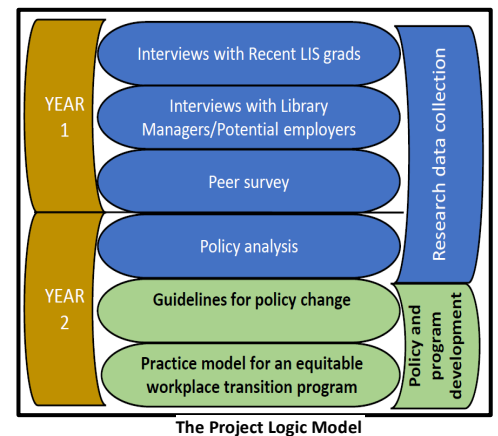
[3]Dali, 2018; Jaeger, 2019; Muir, Thompson, Qayyum, 2020; Vickers, 2015; [4]Austin & Pisano, 2017. [5]UDL – Universal Design for Learning. [6]Oud, 2019; Rathbun-Grubb, 2021.