Lab Management

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Are You in Compliance?

Four years ago, while calmly working in my office, I suddenly heard the sound of splintering wood in the lab. Totally consumed by the work at hand, I remained seated and presumed that my lab assistant would take care of the situation. Some 20 minutes later, I heard a mysterious voice from behind my office door. Unable to see the person speaking, I got out of my chair, walked around the door and discovered a man, sitting in a wheel chair, with a none-too-happy look on his face. He stared me straight in the eye, tilted his head, cleared his throat and informed me that my lab was out of compliance, especially the entryway, which now had a torn section that looked like kindling for a campfire!

My first reaction was anger: "Why hadn't anyone told me about these requirements?" Then, after a moment, I realized that as the manager of this lab it was my responsibility to know what was needed so that all faculty and students could easily access the facility and the materials needed for language study. Within a matter of days, the entrance to the lab was widened; four computer tables and one row of tape carrels were raised in height, and we were in compliance!

Certainly, it should not take such an embarrassing event for any of us to make our labs accessible for all users. And, as in my case, it may be that many of us simply do not initially know how to facilitate the access for those with disabilities. Nevertheless, we are legally bound to become aware of the minimum accessibility standards.

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990

Essentially, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, or ADA, prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities. This act, which went into effect in January of 1992, concerns such areas as medical access, hiring, education, transportation, accommodation and construction as they pertain to individuals with disabilities. Of particular interest to a facility manager, this law requires the elimination of physical barriers such as

- narrow doors and entryways;
- tables, shelves, and counters which are too high or too low; and
- narrow aisles that prevent individuals from using programs and services.

However, physical barriers are just one aspect of accessibility which must be addressed. As Parette (1995) points out, "Policies and procedures may serve as unintended barriers for peoples with disabilities" (225). For example, your facility may provide students with informational materials in written form only. But what of those students with visual disabilities? If we are to provide goods and services, ADA demands that we eliminate any barriers, physical or otherwise, to equal access. A lab director or facility manager clearly faces many ADA-related considerations, too many in fact to discuss in one article. In this issue, I will address the physical accessibility of our specific rooms and in a future article will focus on other accommodations we can make to help individuals with disabilities.

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Primary Goals of ADA

Title II of the Americans With Disabilities Act pertains to public organizations such as state and local governments; Title III of the ADA addresses privately owned institutions. Though different in their institutional focus, both portions of the Act state that our programs and services must be universally accessible. In other words, public and private schools, colleges, and universities must make their services readily available to all individuals. In a physical sense, this involves two important goals: 1) to allow all individuals access into the facility and 2) to allow all individuals access to programs and services offered within. In instances where architectural or structural barriers are present, they must be removed when such changes are "readily achievable." In other words, reasonable modifications must be made to make a room more accessible. Where changes cannot be readily made, alternative means must be found (see suggestions below).

Compliance Guidelines

How do you find out whether or not you are in compliance? "The Readily Achievable Checklist for Universities," taken from the *ADA Compliance Guide for Colleges and Universities,* is one method. This checklist contains crucial information relative to a language lab. It also provides practical solutions or alternatives for any barriers to access which are present. The following are perhaps the most prevalent issues which must be addressed; each section references the *Americans with Disabilities Act Accessibility Guidelines.*

> *"...where architectural or structural barriers are present, they must be removed, when such changes are 'readily achievable.' Where changes cannot be readily made, alternative means must be found.*

> *"The primary barriers to accessibility are often neither money nor the difficulties of renovation, but rather awareness and attitude."*

- **Interior doors and entryways**—The opening must provide a minimum of 32" in clearance. To measure this, open the door and measure from the door facing to the edge of the opened door near its hinges; 32" is the legal minimum. Perhaps the only solution for a narrow entryway is to widen it, a solution which does carry some expense. In addition to door width, door handles must be at a height of 48" or less; lever handles are preferable in cases where students must enter through a closed door. Reasonable and inexpensive solutions to the absence of lever handles are possible. For example, an employee could be stationed near the entrance to help individuals enter as needed, or the door could remain open during lab hours for easy access (*ADAAG Guidelines*, Section 4.13).

- **Access to materials on shelves or tables**—Many labs contain shelves or tables which hold cassettes, videos, diskettes, or portable electronic equipment. To maximize access in this case, the checklist and ADA Guidelines suggest lowering shelves to 54" if a side approach is used by an individual; 48" inches is the recommended height when only a front approach is possible. A lab assistant stationed near the shelves would be a reasonable alternative; he or she could hand the materials to individuals upon request (*ADAAG Guidelines*, Section 4.2).

- **Fixed or built-in stations and tables** —This category includes computer tables, carrels, and desks. The height of these tables must be 28" – 34" above the floor. Knee clearance must measure 27" high, 30" wide and 19" deep. In our lab, this was perhaps the greatest barrier to accessibility. To improve our situation, Physical Plant constructed wooden blocks which raised the tables and carrels to appropriate levels (approximately 1" – 4" higher). This was carried out with minimal expense; it was readily achievable and it did not obligate us to purchase new tables or carrels at a significantly higher cost (*ADAAG Guidelines*, Section 4.32).

- **Percentage of stations required in compliance**—Within a facility, 5% of tables and carrels, or at least one of each type, must be accessible to all users. In other words, if you have 40 listening stations, two stations—or 5%—should meet the standards outlined above. If you have only 10 computer tables, one station must be accessible, even though 5% would amount to less than one table.

In this instance, the presence of a single table in compliance is considered reasonable accommodation (*ADAAG Guidelines*, Section 4.1.3).

- **Placement of wheelchair stations and pathways**—Wheelchair stations must be positioned so that individuals have an accessible route to and from the area, particularly in case of an emergency. An approach aisle or pathway must be a minimum of 36" wide. One practical solution to a narrow pathway is to reposition furniture in the area to increase the width of the aisle (*ADAAG Guidelines*, Sections 4.2 and 4.33).

- **Horizontal circulation**—In addition to a 36" aisle, a 5' turning radius, or a T-shaped space, is also required for areas where individuals who use wheelchairs will be working, so that they may easily move within the work area. Once again, a reasonable solution is to reposition furniture so that the available turning radius is increased (*ADAAG Guidelines*, Section 4.3).

- **Carpeting**—The checklist requires a maximum of 1/2" carpet thickness for wheelchairs. The ideal solution to this problem is to remove or to replace carpet which is not in compliance. Alternatively, labs could install sturdy plastic floor mats leading into areas used by wheelchair patrons (*ADAAG Guidelines*, Section 4.2).

- **Signage**—Facilities which are accessible will display the international symbol of accessibility at the entrance and at appropriate stations. For example, we have placed the internationally recognizable blue signs above those tables which have been raised to an accessible height for individuals with disabilities (*ADAAG Guidelines*, Section 4.30).

"[Parette notes that] 'Policies and procedures may serve as unintended barriers for peoples with disabilities.'"

Other Modifications

In addition to these guidelines, other simple changes can also minimize physical barriers in our labs. For example, many of the standard chairs in my facility have wheels. For individuals with mobility disabilities, in particular those who have difficulty standing up and sitting down, these chairs are very dangerous to use. Therefore, standard non-wheeled chairs are also available in my lab. For faculty and teaching assistants who otherwise are unable to stand or to use a chalkboard for teaching, low-height portable carts for slide and overhead projectors are also available.

When must we be in compliance? First and foremost, any structure built after 1992 must be physically accessible to all

individuals. As of 1994, existing structures must be in the process of making readily achievable modifications for physical accessibility.

The primary barriers to accessibility are often neither money nor the difficulties of renovation, but rather awareness and attitude. Many of us simply are not aware of the legal requirements mandated by ADA. Hopefully all of us have a positive attitude toward ensuring that all of our services are available to everyone. Unfortunately, for any program or facility which feels immune to providing services to all individuals, it is through complaints and lawsuits that changes in facilities and attitudes occurs.

As providers of educational materials and services, we must strive to create an atmosphere of acceptance for all those we serve. Though solutions to physical barriers can seem somewhat daunting, perfectly reasonable measures to enhance accessibility are frequently simple and readily achievable, at little or no cost whatsoever. It is vitally important that we include all individuals in the educational process, and it is through our awareness and positive attitudes that we will be able to do so.

Web Resources

Americans with Disabilities Act Document Center Home Page—http://janweb.icdi.wvu.edu/kinder/

United States Department of Justice Home Page—http://www.usdoj.gov/

References

An Act to Establish a Clear and Comprehensive Prohibition of Discriminations on the Basis of Disability or Americans With Disabilities Act, Public Law 101-336, U.S.C. (1990).

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