Empowering Neurodivergent Librarians to Lead Inclusion in Libraries
Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program – Applied Research

A University of Washington Information School research team is requesting $413,147 in support of a two-year research project to improve our understanding of and our ability to include neurodivergent librarians in libraries. We aim to improve the capacity of libraries to recruit, onboard, retain, and advance neurodivergent librarians, who currently face barriers to inclusion in library workplaces. We propose to do so by developing a neurodiversity at work training program to be used by libraries and MLIS programs across the U.S. to foster neurodiversity inclusion. This proposed research project aligns with the Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program to support the professional development of the library workforce, especially to "address issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the recruitment, development, and retention of faculty, library, and archives leaders from diverse and underrepresented backgrounds" (Objective 2.2).

Project Justification: In the United States, neurodivergent people, including people who are autistic, dyslexic, or who have ADHD, face numerous barriers to inclusion in the workplace, including negative stereotypes and stigma, fear of discrimination, isolation, and an inaccessible work environment.[1] Recent reports indicate that 10.8% of adults currently live with some form of cognitive disability, yet only 3% of librarians report having any type of disability.[2] Neurodivergent adults face significant barriers to employment due to their invisible disability. For example, autistic adults are three times less likely to secure employment compared to any other disabled group.[3] Neurodivergent librarians remain underrepresented in the profession and are largely overlooked by library literature.[4]

For neurodivergent employees, as for disabled library workers, supervisors contribute to positive or negative work experiences.[5] Library supervisors impact experiences of individual employees and contribute to organizational culture and practices. Several recent studies indicate that library administrators and supervisors often lack an understanding of disabilities, especially invisible disabilities such as autism and dyslexia, or hold negative attitudes or stereotypes, which creates barriers to workplace inclusion. Research suggests training and education for library managers and co-workers to enhance inclusion[6] and emphasize moving beyond acceptance training to know-how (practice-based) training for lasting impact.[7] Our project will focus on increasing neurodiversity acceptance and practical 'know-how' for library managers, supervisors, and other employees who play a role in fostering inclusion of neurodivergent librarians. Using a critical lens, our project distributes responsibility for change across the team, rather than burdening the underserved employee.[8]

Gap in research and practice: While libraries have implemented various methods for improving services to neurodivergent patrons, such as autism awareness programs, collection development initiatives, and sensory hours, the representation and experiences of neurodivergent librarians remain unexamined. In recent interviews we conducted in our Autism-Ready Libraries project (LG-246350-OLS-20), patrons noted the importance of representation so patrons could see and interact with neurodivergent librarians who had similar lived experiences. Calls for representation of neurodivergent librarians have been echoed in recent literature.[9] Although several recent projects, such as Targeting Autism, Project PALS, Project ENABLE, and Project A+, have focused on disability and autism inclusion in libraries raising awareness and improving information access and services to patrons. These efforts, however, do not address representation and inclusion of neurodivergent librarians in the workplace, an essential factor in creating inclusion and empowerment for the community. Currently, there is very little research and few established practices to guide recruiting, onboarding, retaining, and advancing neurodivergent librarians in the profession.

The goal of our research project is to build libraries' capacity, at the team level, to improve employment outcomes of neurodivergent librarians, including representation, empowerment, equity, belonging, and advancement. Our project is distinct from current efforts because we will focus on identifying and addressing barriers to inclusion in the workplace as articulated by neurodivergent librarians, develop a training program for peers and managers to foster neurodiversity acceptance and know-how, and draw on critical disability theory and autism hiring program resources in related fields.

This proposed research project will investigate the following questions:
1. What barriers and enablers to workplace inclusion and empowerment do neurodivergent librarians experience?
2. What methods and practices can supervisors and employees use to increase libraries' capacity to recruit, onboard, retain, and advance neurodivergent librarians?
3. What resources/education will enable supervisors and employees to implement neurodivergent-inclusive practices?

Our team includes an interdisciplinary and diverse team of faculty and a doctoral student with expertise to study neurodiversity in a broad range of workplaces. Dr. Hala Annabi is an expert in investigating and developing autism

employment programs for private and public organizations and has published [Autism at Work Playbook](). Dr. Michelle H. Martin, the Chair of the MLIS program at the UW, is an experienced inclusion scholar and educator. Christine Moeller is a neurodivergent doctoral student and academic librarian experienced in professional development.

Project Work Plan: Our study will be carried out in four phases. In **Phase 1**, we will use Annabi and Locke's framework to investigate the barriers and enablers that neurodivergent librarians encounter in the workplace by conducting semi-structured interviews with 20-25 neurodivergent librarians, 20-25 library supervisors, and 20-25 peer employees. We will use a criteria-based sample recruited through library listservs, a group for autistic library workers, professional networks, and social media. Findings from Phase 1 will inform **Phase 2** to conduct nationwide surveys of 75-100 neurodivergent librarians and 100-150 neurotypical library supervisors and employees to further identify and validate barriers and enablers. **Phase 3** will draw on the previous two phases and will employ participatory design to create a high-impact curricular module, for use in library organizations and MLIS programs, that is aimed at not only changing attitudes, but also developing practical 'know-how' for retaining and advancing neurodivergent librarians. The design phase will also include input from neurodivergent librarians and self-advocates and will draw on existing literature on professional education and neurodiversity inclusion. In **Phase 4**, we will deliver and assess the effectiveness of the curricular module through workshops at ALA and at least three nationally recognized MLIS programs including University of Washington. The assessment will measure participants' change in knowledge, attitudes, and practical know-how, and will inform additional revisions before the curricular module is made publicly available.

Project Results: This research project will have the following broad outcomes and national impacts:
1. Our study will expand library literature and boarder employment research on the experiences of neurodivergent librarians, identifying current barriers to and enablers of workplace inclusion,
2. Build the capacity of libraries to create workplaces that are inclusive and empowering of neurodivergent workers through the development of training and a toolkit for managers and employees, and
3. Provide a curriculum module and toolkit that can be used by MLIS programs across the U.S. to prepare inclusive future librarians and improve overall neurodiversity inclusion and empowerment in libraries nationwide.

Project results and outcomes will be disseminated through library conferences (e.g., ALA) and publications. The curriculum module and toolkit will be available to interested MLIS programs and libraries via the UW website.

Diversity Plan: Neurodivergent adults are a marginalized population who remain underrepresented in libraries and library workplaces. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that in 2020, the employment rate for disabled people was 12.6%, which is significantly higher than for non-disabled people (7.9%). In recognition of the intersectional nature of marginalization, this project will solicit participation and feedback from neurodivergent adults and self-advocates with other marginalized identity markers, such race and gender. The curriculum we develop will be generalizable nationwide.

Budget Summary: The estimated project costs $413,147 and will include: direct costs $280,230, F&A $132,917. Costs include salaries and benefits for PI's and doctoral student ($208, 141), participant compensation ($7,250), contractual services (toolkit production & conference fees) ($17,000), Conference travel ($9,600), Supplies ($1,500), Doctoral Student tuition ($36,739).

[1] Anna Krzeminska et al., "The Advantages and Challenges of Neurodiversity Employment in Organizations," *Journal of Management & Organization* 25, no. 4 (July 2019): 453–63.

[2] CDC, "Disability Impacts All of Us Infographic | Disability and Health," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, July 18, 2017, https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/infographic-disability-impacts-all.html; American Library Association, "Member Demographics Study," Text, Tools, Publications & Resources, 2017, http://www.ala.org/tools/research/initiatives/membershipsurveys.

[3] Anne Roux et al., "National Autism Indicators Report: Transition into Young Adulthood" (Drexel Autism Institute: Drexel University, 2015), https://drexel.edu/autismoutcomes/publications-and-reports/publications/National-Autism-Indicators-Report-Transition-to-Adulthood/.

[4] Emily Lawrence, "Loud Hands in the Library," *Progressive Librarian*, no. 41 (Fall 2013): 98–109; Zachary Tumlin, "'This Is a Quiet Library, Except When It's Not:' On the Lack of Neurodiversity Awareness in Librarianship," *Music Reference Services Quarterly* 22, no. 1/2 (April 2019): 3–17.

[5] Hala Annabi and Jill Locke, "A Theoretical Framework for Investigating the Context for Creating Employment Success in Information Technology for Individuals with Autism," *Journal of Management & Organization* 25, no. 4 (July 2019): 499–515; Joanne Oud, "Systemic Workplace Barriers for Academic Librarians with Disabilities," *College & Research Libraries* 80, no. 2 (2019): 169–94.

[6] Robin Brown and Scott Sheidlower, "Claiming Our Space: A Quantitative and Qualitative Picture of Disabled Librarians," *Library Trends* 67, no. 3 (2019): 471–86.

[7] Naba Rizvi, Andrew Begel, and Hala Annabi, "Inclusive Interpersonal Communication Education for Technology Professionals," *AMCIS 2021 Proceedings*, 2021.

[8] Christine M. Moeller, "Disability, Identity, and Professionalism: Precarity in Librarianship," *Library Trends* 67, no. 3 (May 8, 2019): 455–70; Shanna Hollich, "What It Means for a Disabled Librarian to" Pass"," *The International Journal of Information, Diversity, & Inclusion (IJIDI)* 4, no. 1 (2020).

[9] Lawrence, "Loud Hands in the Library"; Elizabeth Leonard, "Disability and Hiring," *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (Summer 2019): 202–4.