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Review of Assistive Technologies in the Library

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ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGIES IN THE LIBRARY

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ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGIES IN THE LIBRARY. Barbara T. Mates, with contributions by William R. Reed IV. Chicago, IL: *American Library Association, 2011, 206 pp., paperback, ISBN 978-0-8389-1070-2, paperback, \$55.00 (ALA members: \$49.50).*

In 2008, the American Library Association stated that it “recognizes that persons with disabilities are a large and often neglected part of society. In addition to many personal challenges, some persons with disabilities face economic inequity, illiteracy, cultural isolation, and discrimination in education, employment, and the broad range of societal activities. The library plays a catalytic role in their lives by facilitating their full participation in society.”

Barbara T. Mates is the former head of the Ohio Library for the Blind and Physically Disabled and she has written a sensitive and sensible guide and resource book for librarians making challenging budget and personnel decisions. She acknowledges that library administrators and boards are currently being forced to “rethink their vision and mission statements as well as rework their long-and short-term plans to accommodate funding cutbacks.” At the same time, she encourages these same administrators and boards to keep the needs of persons with disabilities in mind as monies are spent on materials, databases, computer equipment, furniture, renovations, communication tools, and staff development. The first chapter provides a broad overview of types of disabilities, laws relating to access for persons with disabilities, various accessibility options, and suggestions about creating an advisory board. This chapter alone could serve as an excellent introduction to accessibility issues for library board members and decision makers.

What follows is a fine resource guide for institutions committed to investing in institutional improvements in assistive technology. Chapter 2 was contributed by William R. Reed IV, the regional librarian for the Ohio Library for the Blind and Physically Disabled, and focuses on creating accessible electronic information. Mr. Reed provides a list of fifteen

questions to ask when designing accessible web pages and twelve questions to ask when selecting accessible computer software and electronic content. He explains very clearly how common design choices can cause accessibility problems.

Chapters 4 through 7 cover specific software and devices that can be purchased to address specific user needs. These chapters offer a very thorough introduction to print magnification, text-to-talk options, Braille displays and embossers, audio amplification devices, visual audio alerts and cues, video communication systems, sign language simulation software, alternative keyboards and mice, touch screens, voice recognition software, accessible furniture, and more. This section, coupled with a listing of associated vendors in appendix A, makes for a very useful reference resource.

Chapter 8 includes descriptions of services available through the National Library for the Blind and other agencies and companies. The capabilities of various digital book readers are also covered in detail. There is also a very interesting section on accessible “cyber meeting spaces,” offering various options for making library programs more engaging and entertaining for the widest range of individuals. This chapter along with appendix B provides a very good reference guide of available service providers. Chapter 9 speaks to the importance of training library staff to better support patrons with disabilities with special emphasis on attitude, etiquette, and understanding the needs of persons with various types of disabilities. Chapter 10, coupled with appendix C, offers advice and sources to find funding for new initiatives through grant writing and other avenues. Chapter 11 contains some excellent suggestions on how and where to promote available assistive services and technologies. Chapter 12, also contributed by William R. Reed IV, evaluates various methods of electronic communication (e-mail, social networking sites, blogs, wikis, instant messaging, and specialized relay services. Mr. Reed

effectively demonstrates that these electronic forms of communicating can be “the great equalizer for the library to use when communicating with patrons who have a wide range of disabilities.”

Many chapters in *Assistive Technologies in the Library* provide broad overviews of relevant issues which could be valuable reading for library administrators, board members, and other decision makers. Grant writers will benefit from insights offered in chapter 10, but will need to consult other resources for more comprehensive grant writing advice. Web site designers should review the checklists of questions in chapter 2, but will also need to educate themselves in a variety of other ways. The bulk of the book, though, will serve as a valuable primary reference guide to assistive products, services, and information. The author, while clearly an advocate for persons with disabilities, is very objective in her approach to the topic of accessibility. She clearly intends that this book will not only serve as a valuable reference and resource guide, but will also build awareness and sensitivity, guiding library leaders to more informed decisions when planning and making purchasing and policy decisions.

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