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Breaking Barriers or: How We Learned to Stop Fretting and Make Cultural Organizations More Accessible

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Introduction

Just over 30 years ago, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed, marking historical progress towards civil rights for people with disabilities. This came after decades of disability justice and rights movements. Yet, even with the ADA and other similar national acts, people with disabilities continue to fight for equal rights. ADA guidelines are the bare minimum, and, unfortunately, for many businesses and their staff, creating accessible spaces and opportunities is a work in progress.

Think about the places you spend most of your time. Maybe it's your home, your home office, or a workplace. Now think about who shares that space with you. Maybe it's friends, family, or colleagues. Chances are at least one of them has a disability.

Approximately 1 in 4 Americans are living with a disability.[1] Some disabilities are visible, some invisible. Some disabilities are temporary, some permanent. Too often, when thinking about or confronting disability, we fret about doing or saying the wrong thing. Instead, we need to learn how to talk about disability, understand disability guidelines, and work to go above and beyond those guidelines to create more accessible spaces for people with disabilities.

Background

All too often, people are uncomfortable talking about disabilities. Disabled isn't a bad word, and by shying away from talking about disabilities, we are only further stigmatizing people.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) defines a person with a disability as "a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activity."[2] Most people rely on this definition to frame their response to disabilities; however, this definition doesn't accurately represent everyone who has a disability.

Disabilities are:

Visible and invisible

Visible disabilities include a person paralyzed, using a wheelchair, or a person with one arm. Invisible disabilities include depression, anxiety, Crohn's Disease, and chronic illnesses.

Static, progressive, or intermittent

Static disabilities stay the same over a lifetime. Progressive disabilities increase over time and can be medical or genetic, such as amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). Intermittent disabilities come and go, or include flare-ups, such as cystic fibrosis and fibromyalgia.

A normal part of human diversity

A common thought is that there is a normal kind of body (not disabled). But disability is completely normal. We all exist on a spectrum within our bodies. This kind of diversity makes us human.

Disabilities in the United States

The U.S. census does not measure disability. Instead, the American Community Survey (ACS) is used to understand disabilities in our communities. The survey also measures educational attainment, renting versus owning a home, and veteran status and the data is used by public officials to plan the future.[3] While the ACS provides data on disabilities, there are limitations, primarily that the survey is optional. Therefore, the number of disabilities reported are quite likely lower than reality.

According to the data, 13% of Americans have a disability.[6] A more accepted number is 25%.[1]

Disability is intersectional, meaning it is shaped by other systems of oppression including race, class, gender, ethnicity, and language. For instance, a non-Hispanic white/Caucasian household with no reported disabilities has an average net worth of $132,400 while a non-Hispanic white/Caucasian household with a disability has an average net worth of $27,100. Comparatively, a Black/African American household with no reported disabilities has an average net worth of $14,321 while a Black/African American household with a disability has an average net worth of $1,282.[4]

In the U.S. South, Black students are 71% less likely and Latinx students are 55% less likely to be identified for learning disabilities compared to their white classmates.[5] Disability also effects 40% of transgender adults and 50% of Indigenous people.[1]

Disabilities disproportionately affect people of color and people of low socioeconomic status.

Disabilities measured on the ACS include

- Cognition: Serious difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions
- Mobility: Serious difficulty walking or climbing stairs
- Independent Living: Difficulty doing errands alone
- Hearing: Deafness or serious difficulty hearing
- Vision: Blindness or serious difficulty seeing
- Self-care: Difficulty dressing or bathing

Data for types of disabilities measured do not greatly differ between the state of Utah and the U.S. population. Figure 1 shows the percentage of each type of disability (of people who reported a disability) in Utah.[6]

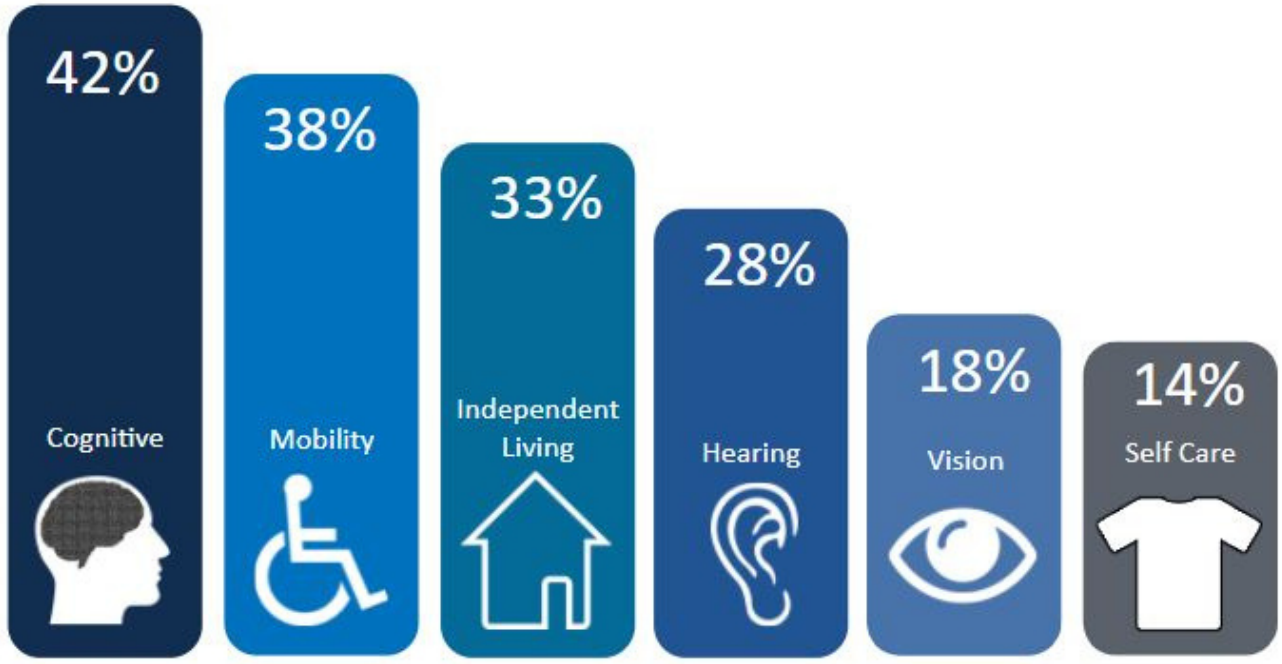


Figure 1. The percentage of each type of disability (of people who reported a disability) in Utah.

We will all experience disability
at some point in our lives.

The Need for Accessibility in Arts, Culture, & Museums

In 2017, nearly 60 million people visited an art museum or gallery while 63 million people attended a theater performance.[7] Additionally, 91% of Americans believe the arts are vital to a well-rounded education.[8] In 2018, more people visited a museum (including science centers, zoos, and aquariums) than attended a professional sporting event.[9] Arts and museums saw an increase in participation year-to-year prior to 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is estimated that over 1 million residents and visitors of Utah are living with a disability. A survey of Utah constituents showed that many patrons with disabilities choose to not attend arts and cultural activities because they know or assume that the event is not accessible. The reach and impact of arts, culture, and museums on society, along with the number of people across the country and the state with disabilities, indicates the need to ensure these spaces, their opportunities, and their programs are accessible to all potential users.

Solution

Numerous barriers to full access exist, but the Utah Division of Arts & Museums (UA&M) and Utah non-profit Art Access believe the main barriers facing Utahns are untrained staff and a lack of willingness or ability for arts, culture, and museum professionals to provide accommodations. Additionally, there is often a lack of accessible physical spaces, missing information on websites and published materials, and unclear or no processes for patrons to request accommodations.

Understanding disabilities in our communities and the lack of access to art, culture, and museum spaces, UA&M partnered with Art Access to create and deliver **Breaking Barriers: A Cultural Accessibility Project.**

> The ADA was a wonderful achievement. But it was only the tip of the iceberg.
> ~Denise Sherer Jacobson

Goal of Breaking Barriers

Breaking Barriers: A Cultural Accessibility Project is designed to provide professional development to ensure arts, culture, and museums are accessible to every potential patron.

The training helps Utah's cultural organizations to become more accessible. In turn, these cultural organizations make the one million Utah residents and visitors with disabilities feel more welcome and more likely to experience the rich cultural landscape the state has to offer.

Participants

Arts, culture, and museum staff - and their respective organizations - are required to apply to participate in a Breaking Barriers cohort. Applications open a couple of months prior to a cohort start date.

Each cohort has a capacity of approximately 10 organizations, or about 30 participants. This allows the facilitators and participants to get to know each other, keeps the training dialogic and personal, and, as evidenced in the evaluations, maintains a safe space for participants to share.

Organizations are allowed to send up to three people to participate in Breaking Barriers. The staff who attend are responsible for sharing the information internally with other staff, volunteers, and board members. This internal effort ensures the information isn't lost and ultimately leads to getting more arts, culture, and museum professionals trained.

Training Overview

Over the course of six weeks, Breaking Barriers workshops focus on accessibility needs for people with the following disabilities:

Deaf/Hard-of-Hearing/Deaf-Blind

Blind and Low Vision

Physical and Mobility

Neurodiverse and Sensory

Developmental

Learning

Breaking Barriers training is organized into three parts:

1. Six 2-hour online training sessions, during which participants receive direct instruction from Art Access staff.

2. Weekly homework assignments and peer-to-peer conversations within their organization to be completed outside of the training, totaling 8 hours.

3. Two hours of support from Art Access staff after the conclusion of the training to help shape their organization's accessibility plan.

At the end of the project, Breaking Barriers participants and their respective organizations are asked to develop an accessibility plan that includes short, medium, and long-term goals to make their physical sites more accessible to the disability community. Each organization is also asked to identify an accessibility coordinator.

Along with the training, each participating organization receives access to an accessibility deficiencies worksheet, an accessibility plan template, slide decks from the workshops, and access to an online group of Breaking Barriers alumni.

22+

Hours of accessibility training completed after participation

Positive Impact on Utah's Communities

Participation in Breaking Barriers has led to long-term changes. **Plan-B Theatre** in Salt Lake City highlights accessibility on their website, including detailed information about the theatre. They also include an accommodation request form for both performers and visitors.

Springville Museum of Art also shares accessibility information, including resources available for a sensory-inclusive visit and requesting accommodations such as ASL interpreters or a tactile tour.

Moab Music Festival strives to provide accessible musical experiences and encourages dialogue regarding accessibility for each concert.

Ririe-Woodbury Dance Company in Salt Lake City shares their accessibility mission statement and values on their website. They also direct patrons to their partner, Salt Lake County Arts & Culture, for specific accommodations.

Utah Symphony Utah Opera has an accessibility page for each of their venues. Accommodations available are listed by need, including for people who are blind or low vision, deaf or hard-of-hearing, and neurodiverse.

These are just a few examples of the many changes organizations have made after participation as a way to communicate with and offer programs for people with disabilities.

52

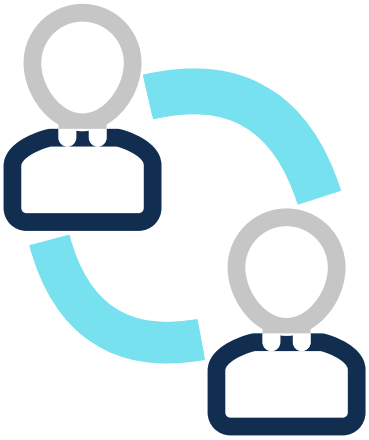
Organizations who have completed Breaking Barriers

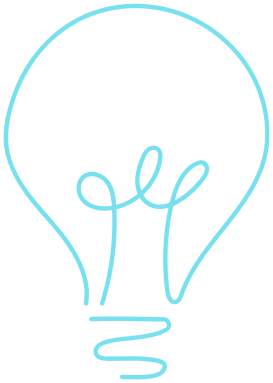
143

Staff from those organizations who directly participated in Breaking Barriers

Positive Impact on Program Participants

One of the ways we know that the Breaking Barriers training is effective is through the evaluation results. Participants were asked to report their knowledge level both before and after the training on different areas covered throughout the training. In most cases, participants show a marked improvement in their understanding about disabilities and accommodations.



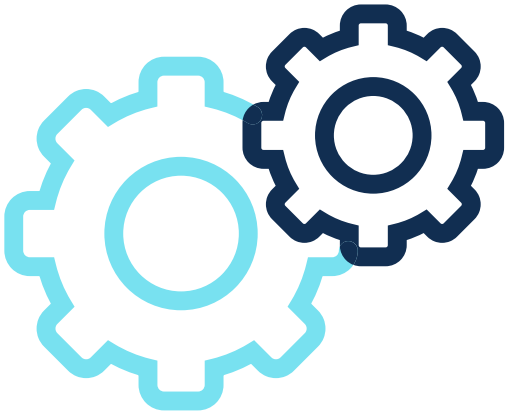


Overall, participants showed an increase in understanding:

- Disability language
- Intersectionality of disability
- Accessibility law in the U.S.
- Universal design
- How to navigate mistakes made when addressing accessibility issues in an organization

> I loved learning about all of it. Even the uncomfortable history.

Participants reflected on the power of discussions during the workshops, practicing and working through different scenarios, and hearing other participants' perspectives to help inform their own. Additionally, participants appreciated the personal connections and stories Breaking Barriers facilitators brought to the workshops.



Participants were invited to provide feedback about their experience to the Breaking Barriers facilitators. Responses to "What was the most beneficial takeaway?" were evaluated for recurring themes and showed that participants benefited from learning the history of disabilities and specific terminology to use, understanding new perspectives, learning about microaggressions, and how to offer accommodations for people with disabilities.

> This training has been awakening and eye-opening.

Conclusion

Breaking Barriers: A Cultural Accessibility Project is cutting-edge professional development for arts, culture, and museum staff across the state of Utah. The shifts in perspective, as evidenced in the evaluations, stays with people and impacts how they approach their work in the cultural sector going forward.

The project has also created a community of accessibility advocates, which grows with every cohort. Participants are able to look to organizations who had been in earlier cohorts as examples of how to successfully implement important accessibility tools.

Accessibility training is needed, especially for arts, culture, and museums. More critically, a safe place for professionals in these fields to discuss disability and accommodations with peers is needed. Continuing Breaking Barriers in an online platform, in-person, or as a sustainable working group with a hybrid model should not only be considered but prioritized.

Ultimately, by training organizations to have more accessible programs and creative spaces, previously excluded audiences can experience more of the cultural treasures of Utah.

> Disability is never the barrier. The barrier is society and expectations.
> ~Haben Girma

Acknowledgement

Breaking Barriers: A Cultural Accessibility project was supported at the administrative level of the Utah Division of Arts & Museums.

The hard work of finding the right partner and bringing Breaking Barriers and its curriculum to fruition fell to two Division staff. **Jason Bowcutt**, the Community Programs & Performing Arts Manager, and **Jennifer Ortiz**, Museum Services Manager (now serving as Director of Utah State History). Without their dedication to accessibility work, Breaking Barriers would not exist.

The Division of Arts & Museums found an excellent partner in Art Access. These two organizations spent numerous hours in meetings and planning sessions.

Art Access provided guidance and helped shape the Breaking Barriers curriculum. Collaboration between the Division and Art Access is ongoing, making tweaks to the curriculum over time. Breaking Barriers and parts of this white paper would not be possible without the insight, experiences, and perspectives of **Shandra Benito**, **Kerry Carlson**, **Gabriella Huggins**, and **Max Barnewitz**. These individuals also facilitate a majority of the training.

To support facilitation of Breaking Barriers, **Michelle Mileham** joined the team in Jennifer's departure. Michelle also guides the evaluation of the program.

The program described in this paper would not be possible without the hard work and dedication of each of these individuals.

About Us

Utah Arts & Museums (UA&M) seeks to advance Utahns' quality of life through arts and museum experiences and cultural opportunities, and serves schools, local arts agencies, organizations, community centers, performing groups, museums, and individuals across Utah. UA&M acts as a state coordinator and advisor on topics of importance to arts and museums communities. UA&M is the primary agency in Utah that distributes state and federal funds to stimulate and encourage growth in the creative industries. These funds are appropriated directly for arts and museums by both the Utah State Legislature and the National Endowment for the Arts. UA&M is a division of the Department of Community and Cultural Engagement (CCE) within the Utah state government.

Art Access builds an inclusive and diverse arts community in Utah through creative opportunities for people with disabilities and other marginalized communities, and through public engagement in the arts. Art Access has been supporting the intersection of art and accessibility to the arts in Utah since 1984. While the programming has changed over the years, Art Access has always focused on making art accessible for all.

Dr. Michelle Mileham is a Project Manager and Accessibility Coordinator with the Utah Division of Arts & Museums. She previously served as Director of Education at Tracy Aviary in Salt Lake City. Prior to moving to Utah, Michelle completed a Master's and Ph.D. at Oregon State University, studying Environmental Sciences and Education with a specific focus on museum education and evaluation.

About Images

Introduction photo: (counter-clockwise from bottom left) Treshelle Edmond, Ali Storker, Amelia Hensley, Lauren Luiz, Kathryn Gallagher, Krysta Rodriguez, and Alexandra Winter in the Deaf West Theater production of Spring Awakening. Photo by Joan Marcus, 2015. Published by National Endowment for the Arts at https://www.arts.gov/stories/blog/2016/creating-opportunities-deaf-theater-artists

Background photo: (from left) Justin Dart Jr., Jennifer Keelan-Chaffins and her mother Cynthia Keelan, Bob Kafka, and Dianne Coleman. Photography by Jeff Reinking. ADAPT activists, including Jennifer and her mother Cynthia, protest the inaccessibility of public transportation in San Fransisco, in 1987. Published by Jennifer Keelan-Chaffins at https://jkclegacy.com/about

Solution photo: A visitor who is blind experiences Touching the Prado by feeling his way along a 3-D replica of the Mona Lisa, painted by an apprentice to Leonardo da Vinci. Photograph by Ignacio Hernando Rodriguez, Courtesy of Museo del Prado. Published by Museums + Heritage at https://advisor.museumsandheritage.com/features/touching-the-prado-a-hands-on-approach-to-accessibility/

Conclusion photo: Participants in the Museum of Modern Art's Department of Education's Access Programs create collages. Photo: Kirsten Schroeder. Published by Inside/Out A MoMA/MoMA PS1 Blog at https://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2012/06/08/assorted-associated-arranged-an-exhibition-of-access-programs-participant-artwork/

Resources

Below are links to some of the organizations who have completed the Breaking Barriers training and done exceptional work afterwards.

Plan-B Theatre: planbtheatre.org/accessibility/

Springville Museum of Art: smofa.org/accessibility

Moab Music Festival: moabmusicfest.org/calendar/accessibility/

Ririe-Woodbury Dance Company: ririewoodbury.com/about/accessibility

Utah Symphony Utah Opera: usuo.org/

Salt Lake City Arts Council (integrated web accessibility menu): saltlakearts.org/

Below you can find more information about our team.

Utah Division of Arts & Museums: artsandmuseums.utah.gov/

Art Access: artaccessutah.org/

Below are some other resources we appreciate.

VSA: The International Organization for Arts and Disability: kennedy-center.org/education/vsa/

National Endowment for the Arts: arts.gov/impact/accessibility/publications-checklists-and-resources

Pressman, H., & Schulz, D. (2021). The Art of Access: A Practical Guide for Museum Accessibility. Rowman & Littlefield.

https://artsandmuseums.utah.gov/breaking-barriers/

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