

Fat Accessibility Concerns in Academic Libraries: A Primer

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Anti-Fatness

“Anti-fatness and anti-fat bias are umbrella terms that describe the attitudes, behaviours, and social systems that specifically marginalized, exclude, underserve, and oppress fat bodies.

They refer both to individual bigotry as well as institutional policies designed to marginalized fat people” (Gordon, 2020, p. 10)

The War on Fat

Fat

- Uncontrolled
- Unhealthy
- Sinful
- Damned
- Failure
- Risky
- Leads to death

Thin

- Disciplined
- Healthy
- Virtuous
- Salvation
- Success
- Safety
- Leads to life

Fat Research in Higher Education (Students)

Hetrick and Attig (2009)

- Classroom spaces function not only to shape students' minds intellectually, but also to shape their bodies by promoting a homogeneously-sized student population, a message violently enacted through rigid and unforgiving furniture

Brown (2018)

- Fat-unfriendly spaces and social shame negatively impacts students' construction of themselves as learners in the classroom
- Caused them to question the “validity of their assertions and their right to belong on campus, especially when they felt they were being judged as bodies rather than as learners” (14).



Fat Research in Higher Education (Staff/Faculty)

Fisanick (2006)

- Fat faculty members face discrimination in the promotion and tenure process.

Tischner and Malson (2008)

- Fat faculty members and employees are perceived as less credible, knowledgeable, and competent by their peers.

Hunt and Rhodes (2018)

- Fat faculty and employees report being body shamed, verbally abused, and subjected to microaggressions.

Heath (2021)

- Fat employees faced prejudice and were provided fewer resources, prompting them to consider leaving higher education.

Fat research in LIS (1)

Angell and Price (2012)

- How fat studies and fat politics is represented in the Library of Congress Classification
- Virtually none classified in Class H, but instead in Class R

Versluis, Agostino, and Cassidy (2020)

- Studied experiences of fat female academic librarians
- Must not only work to invisibilize the coding of librarianship as a feminized profession in the male-coded academy, but also must perform, to the best of their ability, a normative body
- Double-whammy of feeling non-belonging in academic spaces (professionally and physically)

Fat Research in LIS (2)

Chabot (2021)

- Chair seat dimensions are predominantly 17-19 inches wide by 17-25 inches deep.
- Weight loads
 - Folding chairs: 150 to 165 lbs (68 to 75 kg)
 - Most common: 250 to 300 lbs (113 to 136 kg)
 - Only one company had an “Oversize” section, load up to 500 lbs (227 kg).
- Online library furniture catalogues do a poor job at providing furniture weight loads and seat dimensions (either not present or buried)
- Fat inaccessibility has impact on belonging, ability to be an equal citizen in democracy

Is your library reproducing
anti-fatness?

Recommendations for Furniture and Spaces

- In space planning, don't forget the fat perspective!
- Have a variety of seating (armed and armless) in public spaces
- Ideally, don't have a special "fat" seat
- Avoid combined/attached furniture that is immovable or that constrains
- Provide more places to rest (navigating campuses and libraries involve a lot of physical activity!)
- Watch for one-size-fits-all claims when purchasing furniture
- Are your employee workspaces fat accessible as well? Do your meeting rooms have a variety of seating? Is larger office furniture available?

Interpersonal/Cultural Recommendations

- Fat concerns are often intersectional
- Avoid “obesity” (from Latin *obesus*: “having eaten oneself fat”)
- “Just concerned about your health” = please don’t
- Are your employee or user wellness programs size-inclusive or are they merely promoting thinness?
- Ask library furniture vendors for more fat-friendly options

Contact & References

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