

Learning on the job: Censorship and intellectual freedom in the real world

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Abstract: This column includes a brief overview of how to handle censorship, community challenges, and other intellectual freedom basics – topics seldom taught in LIS programs.

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What LIS Programs Rarely Teach

Considering the democratic and socially responsible nature of librarianship, a profession based on the fundamental concept of sharing, it may seem reasonable to assume that any student of the 60 American Library Association (ALA)-accredited LIS graduate programs in the United States and Canada will graduate with a strong knowledge base about ethics, intellectual freedom, and strategies on handling censorship and community challenges.¹ Unfortunately, fewer than half of those 60 universities offer any courses on these topics, and those that do tend to categorize them as electives, some of which come around on the academic schedule just once every two years.

If you did study these important topics in your LIS program, you're among the fortunate few. If you didn't, there are a few gaps to fill in before that first challenge crosses your desk.

Read Up

The *Intellectual Freedom Manual*, written by the ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF), offers a wealth of information about the ALA's Library Bill of Rights, the right to receive information, and patron privacy standards. This manual covers the basics of intellectual freedom as well as professional guidelines that librarians are expected to follow when dealing with a challenge or threat of censorship (Magi, Garnar, American Library Association, & Office for Intellectual Freedom, 2015). It's reasonable to expect a professional librarian to be prepared to expertly handle challenges to materials and concerns about privacy, and librarians should not wait until after a challenge to read this manual for the first time.

¹ For a list of all 60 accredited LIS graduate programs in the United States and Canada, see the ALA's Alphabetical List of Institutions with ALA-Accredited Programs at <http://www.ala.org/educationcareers/accreditedprograms/directory/alphalist>

Other professional guidelines to read include the Library Bill of Rights and its official interpretations, the ALA's Freedom to Read Statement and Freedom to View Statement, and the First Amendment to the United States Constitution.

Keep Materials Where They Belong

There may be times when you will find yourself tempted to place materials behind barriers in order to placate angry patrons, either real or imagined, who may object to them. For example, if an irate parent objects to sexual content in a young adult (YA) novel, it may seem reasonable to keep the book behind the reference desk, thus forcing patrons to specifically ask for it or even to insist that minors have parental permission to access the book. While this may satisfy an upset patron in the short term, it breaks serious and fundamental rules regarding access and minors' rights.

Barricading books creates a phenomenon called the chilling effect. Patrons of all ages, but especially minors, are unlikely to approach a service desk and request an item. The Library Bill of Rights makes it clear that minors have the same First Amendment rights in libraries as adults (American Library Association, 2006). This means they have a right to have the information they need where it belongs – openly and accessible.

Sometimes, instead of concealing books or other library items behind barriers, librarians may choose to appease upset patrons (or even patrons who they imagine may become upset) by moving items out of their intended area. This may involve housing YA books in the adult section, or children's books in the YA section. While this might seem to be a fair compromise, it creates a false representation of the item in question. Imagine, for example, if all of Judy Blume's YA novels except her work *Forever*,

long-famous for its depictions of teenage sex, were housed on the YA shelves, with *Forever* in the adult section. By placing *Forever* in the adult section, the library has, without saying a word, attached a judgment to that book and decreased the odds that it will reach its intended audience.

Barricading or purposefully shelving items away from their proper place are forms of self-censorship, in which librarians take it upon themselves to decide which items are and are not appropriate for their patrons to access (Whelan, 2009). When librarians allow themselves down the slippery slope of self-censorship, they succumb to what is likely the least recognized, yet most common – and insidious – form of censorship that can take place in a library (Ibid). Barricading books can lead to skipping over titles that make librarians uncomfortable during selection, which can then lead to weeding too heavily in those areas, ultimately resulting in a biased collection. The skew in a collection marred by self-censorship could be due to something as simple as a librarian preferring cats over dogs, thus skipping over cat-themed books, or as complex as a librarian avoiding works on potentially controversial topics such as same-sex marriage, abortion, or evolution.

All librarians have biases, be they significant or trivial. Knowing our biases and making a proactive, concerted effort to keep them out of our collection activities is part of the job of a professional and ethical librarian. Recognizing this fact goes a long way toward keeping self-censorship at bay.

Listen Up

While it may be extremely uncomfortable to interact with an upset patron, it's important to keep in mind, first and foremost, that the patron is making use of his public library and being actively engaged with the processes and policies that guide both the library and the profession as a whole. How

nice it would be if all patrons were so involved! Therefore, opening the conversation by thanking the complainant is automatically Step One. Doing so displays professionalism while also setting an appropriate tone for the conversation (LaRue, 2007). By making use of the *Intellectual Freedom Manual's* step-by-step guide for handling challenges with an attitude of openness and genuine curiosity, the whole situation is likely to calm down.

You're Never Alone

Creating programs and reading lists for Banned Books Week and Choose Privacy Week lets the public know that their library is committed to behaving ethically in cases of challenges or bans. Any challenge to items in your library should be reported immediately to the OIF so it can be added to their database of challenges (American Library Association, 2016). If you're unable to gain support or advice from your supervisor or from library management, the OIF can assist by providing free, confidential support and consulting services to librarians dealing with intellectual freedom concerns (American Library Association, 2008). The National Coalition against Censorship (National Coalition against Censorship, n.d.) and the Comic Book Legal Defense Fund (Comic Book Legal Defense Fund, n.d.) are other free speech organizations dedicated to helping librarians and others handle challenges.

Being a new librarian has its difficulties, but with the support of the OIF and the guidelines put forth by the ALA, dealing with censorship isn't as hard as it might appear. When in doubt, reach out.

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