

# Social Justice Paves the Way for Libraries Serving Transgender Communities

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## Social Justice as a Core Value

In order to effectively serve diverse communities, libraries must integrate this core value into the core of their services. Social justice work isn't treated as a mere addition to libraries; rather, it is a foundational design of libraries. In other words, libraries must be designed in a way that supports a community before they can effectively serve that community.

## Misserved => Underserved

How do libraries fare with the transgender community? Research shows that libraries have plenty of room to grow. "Libraries are often ranked very low on the Transgender community's list of preferred information providers" (Lytton 55-56). Transgender individuals may decline to use reference services for several reasons:

- lack of transgender resources in library collections
- the censorship of transgender materials
- the public nature of in-person reference services
- perceived risk of misinformation/mistreatment by library customers and/or library staff
- lived experience of misinformation/mistreatment

## Start with the Staff

If libraries are often perceived as spaces that aren't trans-friendly, how can libraries serve the transgender community? Since library staff are the core of library services, libraries can begin social justice work with training that prepares their staff for this work. Libraries can also integrate social justice work into the library's design by offering:

- SafeZone and gender inclusion trainings
- EDI committees (Equity, Diversity, Inclusion)
- Library policies that specifically protect gender identity and gender expression

## Collection Development as Social Justice

Libraries must rectify the lack of resources by including up-to-date resources. Transgender individuals may seek information on transgender experiences, such as medical transitioning, legal name changes, and coming out. Transgender individuals may also seek stories reflecting their experiences.

Libraries may face barriers to including LGBTQ+ stories in their collections. Some barriers include few LGBTQ+ books being published, restrictive budgets, and perceived risks, such as the fear of book challenges. "Rather than risk the negative publicity that materials challenges bring, some school librarians may choose not to promote, or even to collect, LGBTQ-themed literature" (Hughes-Hassell 11). By excluding these materials, libraries exclude the community represented in these materials - the antithesis of social justice as a core value. Since resources and representation are a key information need, including these materials is key to serving the transgender community.

Libraries can use many resources to make this service possible. To develop their collections, libraries can use the annual bibliographies of LGBTQ+ materials published by ALA's Rainbow Round Table, booklists such as The Rainbow Book List and Over the Rainbow Books, and awards such as Lambda Literary Award and Stonewall Book Award.



## Diversity by Design: The Stories We Include

Social justice work doesn't stop with ordering LGBTQ+ materials. It's not just about what's included; it's about how it's included. Libraries can:

- Interfile LGBTQ+ materials on the shelves
- Include transgender literature in displays in two ways. First, as a part of trans-specific themes, such as Transgender Visibility Week. Second, as a part of other displays and lists, normalizing transgender representation
- Integrate LGBTQ+ materials in the library's wider services. By "advocating and integrating," libraries "do not just add LGBTQ-themed titles to the collection, but actively promote them by featuring them on reading lists, including them in displays, booktalking them, recommending them to teachers for inclusion in the curriculum, and including them in library-sponsored book clubs" (Hughes-Hassell 4)

## Diversity by Design: The Language We Use

In addition to fears of misinformation or mistreatment, transgender individuals may fear being misgendered or deadnamed. How can libraries address this issue? Redesign libraries to be inclusive.

- Rather than using gendered terms, such as guy or girl, use gender inclusive language, such as patron or student
- Normalize pronouns by modeling the optional use of pronouns in both written and verbal interactions
- Just as preferred pronouns can be normalized, so can preferred names. Include preferred names in all library forms

## Diversity by Design: The Services We Provide

The core value of social justice often goes hand in hand with the core value of privacy. Libraries can protect the privacy and safety of transgender patrons through their services. These services may include self-checkout machines, anonymous online reference chats, remote name changes, gender neutral restrooms, and more.

To provide stellar services, libraries can invite local LGBTQ+ organizations to have a voice in these services. LGBTQ+ community members and LGBTQ+ staff should never be tokenized or expected to speak for an entire community; instead, libraries can extend the invitation, empowering the community to determine their own degree of involvement.