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LIS 701

16 December 2022

Social Justice Paves the Way for Libraries Serving Transgender Communities

Libraries are making headlines, but the headlines aren't pretty. LGBTQ+ books are challenged, dominating ALA's Banned Books lists. LGBTQ+ displays are protested in libraries across the country. Drag storytimes are sometimes met with messages of support, sometimes with threats of violence. With such a virulent sociopolitical climate, the core value of social justice plays a key role in how libraries serve transgender individuals. Although these findings may be applicable to the broader LGBTQ+ community, narrowing the scope to transgender individuals empowers information professionals to address this user group's unique information needs.

Before exploring how libraries serve this community, it's crucial to explore how libraries practice 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. By utilizing this framework, a library places "inclusion at the core of the library, integrating it seamlessly into decision making, hiring practices, collections, and public programming […] libraries must renew their commitment to equitable access and service, making it clear that they are dedicated to including vulnerable communities" (Movius 38). In order to equitably serve these vulnerable communities, "an information organization must question how its policies, structures, and procedures are supportive of the community and how its collective efforts can be inclusive and

aligned against oppression" (Wong et al. 64). In other words, libraries must be designed in a way that supports a community before they can effectively serve that community.

How do libraries fare with the transgender community? Research shows that many libraries have plenty of room to grow. Due in part to the lack of transgender resources and the censorship of transgender materials, "libraries are often ranked very low on the Transgender community's list of preferred information providers" (Lyttan and Laloo 55). If not the library, what are the preferred information providers? In addition to seeking information from friends, family, and LGBTQ+ community members, the internet serves as a primary information provider for many transgender individuals. Compared to a public library, the internet is considered "faster and more conducive to personal privacy" (Stewart and Kendrick 611).

Although it's not typically the preferred information provider, transgender individuals do seek information at libraries. However, transgender individuals "hardly ever use reference service because they either simply felt that they did not need help or they were uncomfortable asking the reference staff a LGBT-related question or are afraid of being judged by the staff member, while others feared that other students would overhear their question" (Lyttan and Laloo 56).

This fear of judgement is hardly unfounded. Transgender patrons "often report low satisfaction with library services, a lack of helpful resources, and reference interactions that range from apathetic to antagonistic" (Movius 38). In a study that surveyed adult transgender patrons, one participant described how they "dealt with ignorance of LGBTQ identities, ignorance of resources, [and staff with] clear distaste in dealing with me and my questions" (Drake and Bielefield 164). Another participant described experiences rooted in misinformation, rather than mistreatment. When they spoke with the librarian, "it was not actively negative, but

the reference librarian certainly didn't understand until I went over several basic definitions and explanations of transgender issues" (Drake and Bielefield 164). Between the future risk and the past experience of unpleasant interactions, it makes sense that "many LGBT library users became reluctant to consider the library as a valuable resource" (Lyttan and Laloo 58).

If libraries are often perceived as spaces that aren't trans-friendly, how can libraries serve the transgender community? Considering that library staff are the core of these services, libraries can begin social justice work with training that prepares their staff for this work. The experiences of transgender library users "highlight the need for libraries to provide their staff with comprehensive training in regards to appropriate treatment of LGBQ and transgender patrons" (Drake and Bielefield 164). SafeZone and gender inclusion trainings "ensure at least a basic level of knowledge; they also partly remove the burden of educating others from your LGBTQ+ employees. All library employees, ideally including security and volunteers, should participate, as everyone interacts with LGBTQ+ patrons and coworkers" (Krueger 73).

In addition to integrating social justice work into staff training, libraries can integrate social justice work into staff committees. EDI committees can be an invaluable resource for integrating social justice into the library's design. As for inviting transgender staff to EDI committees, LGBTQ+ employees shouldn't be expected to advocate for LGBTQ+ identities based on their identity. This approach can be tokenizing. Instead, invite staff "who are actually interested in EDI work […] focus on work, scholarship, or interest instead of identity" (Krueger 71). Advocacy for transgender individuals should never fall on the shoulders of transgender individuals. EDI work is the work of the *entire* library, made possible through the practices and policies of each library.

Libraries can develop their policies to serve transgender individuals, such as by including gender identity and gender expression in nondiscrimination policies (Drake and Bielefield 165). Having said that, it is not enough to just have this policy in writing; libraries must put inclusion into practice. Diversity and inclusion "do not grow without intentional cultivation. It is not enough to simply open the doors of the library with a willingness to serve those who visit and subsequently call that openness and willingness inclusion" (Movius 38).

How can libraries cultivate this inclusion? In addition to staff training, EDI committees, and library policy, libraries must assess and address the needs of the transgender community. As far as information needs are concerned, libraries must rectify the lack of resources by including current, accurate resources on gender identity. Making these resources accessible is especially important when "patrons may be reluctant to ask for a librarian's help due to fear of outing themselves or because they are unsure how to talk about the subject; they will see only what is on the shelf" (Krueger 137). While browsing these shelves, transgender individuals may seek information on transgender experiences, such as medical transitioning, legal name changes, and coming out (Lyttan and Laloo 48).

In addition to seeking information on transgender experiences, transgender individuals may seek stories reflecting these experiences. For example, including LGBTQ+ books in school libraries can positively impact LGBTQ+ students. "Many books written for young LGBT readers directly address common problems faced by LGBT youth, and suggest helpful solutions, thus reminding transgender students that they are not alone" (Lyttan and Laloo 56). Transgender students aren't the only readers who benefit. "While LGBT-themed materials in a school library can provide much-needed support to LGBT students struggling with feelings of isolation, non-LGBT students can also gain greater understanding of sexual orientation and gender identity in

ways that contribute to an overall environment of respect. Particularly in schools with less LGBT visibility, these materials can show students that the LGBT community is diverse and inclusive of a wide variety of voices." (Lyttan and Laloo 55-56).

Libraries may face barriers to including LGBTQ+ voices in their collections. One barrier is a lack of LGBTQ+ books being published. The Cooperative Children's Book Center notes, "In 2017, of the approximately 3,700 books we received at the CCBC, we counted 136 – less than 4 percent – with significant LGBTQ+ content" (Tyner). Of these books, only 11 stories featured primary transgender characters (Tyner). Another study uncovered that high school libraries were under-collecting LGBTQ+ books. "Although LGBTQ teens are estimated to make up 5.9 percent of the students in American high schools, the average number of LGBTQ-themed titles held by these school libraries was 0.4 percent" (Hughes-Hassell et al. 1).

In addition to a dearth of LGBTQ+ books, libraries may face other barriers, such as limited budgets for collection development. Libraries may also face 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 et al. 11). If libraries are to truly embrace social justice as a core value, excluding these materials excludes the community represented in these materials – the antithesis of social justice. Since representation is a key information need for the transgender community, including transgender materials not only serves this community, but also serves as social justice work.

In order to develop their LGBTQ+ collections, libraries can cultivate their resources. For example, libraries can utilize ALA's Rainbow Round Table, booklists such as Rainbow Book List and Over the Rainbow Books, and awards such as Lambda Literary Award and Stonewall

Book Award ("Open to All" 5). This list is far from exhaustive. Libraries have access to a growing body of resources – from booklists, to blogs, to initiatives like We Need Diverse Books.

Social justice work doesn't stop with ordering diverse books. It's not just about what's included; it's about *how* it's included. How libraries include LGBTQ+ books on the shelves demonstrates this principle. Interfiling books in library collections can normalize LGBTQ+ representation in these collections ("Open to All" 6). In contrast, some students in academic libraries have expressed interest in an "LGBT section" (Stewart and Kendrick 607), indicating that a library's approach to including materials must be responsive to the needs of their patrons.

In addition to integrating books into the library's collection, libraries can integrate LGBTQ+ materials into their wider services. By integrating and advocating, 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 et al. 4). This approach embodies diversity by design; rather than treating diversity as an addition to the library, libraries can integrate diversity into their very foundation.

As a part of this foundational work, libraries can include transgender literature in displays in two primary ways. First, as a part of trans-specific themes, such as a display for Transgender Visibility Week. Second, as a part of overall displays. "As books by black authors should not show up only in February, books on trans topics should be included wherever they are relevant. This is another way to demonstrate that your library respects and supports trans and gender variant people at all times. It also demonstrates that trans and gender variant people engage with the world in ways not solely defined by our gender identity" (Krueger 138). Whether trans-

specific or trans-inclusive, library events, artwork, and displays can help transgender patrons feel "welcome and safe" (Movius 48).

In a society where safe spaces for transgender individuals can be difficult to find, simply providing that space can be a way for libraries to practice social justice work. Considering that transgender patrons may use the library as a third space, creating a safe space can be instrumental for welcoming transgender individuals. For example, "some transgender students may not use the library in finding the path of their gender or sexual orientation but simply appreciate the solitude of the library that allows them to reflect without interference" (Lyttan and Laloo 53). When transgender individuals of all ages navigate this space, how can libraries make this space welcoming?

The answer lies in diversity by design. Library spaces must be designed to accommodate transgender individuals. Restrooms, for example, can be a challenging space for transgender individuals. "The 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey found that 'more than half (59%) of respondents avoided using a public restroom in the past year because they were afraid of confrontations or other problems they might experience'" (Krueger and Matteson 213). In order to address this issue, gender-neutral restrooms should be provided – and should *not* require a key. "By requiring patrons to request access to the bathroom, groups that may experience discrimination are further disenfranchised as even bathroom use becomes a regulated activity with librarians as gatekeepers" (Drake and Bielefield 165). Libraries can change their roles from gatekeepers to advocates by providing gender-neutral restrooms, ensuring accessibility to all restrooms, and developing nondiscrimination policies that protect and respect each person's agency to choose their own restroom.

Another challenging space for transgender patrons can be the public reference desk. In addition to fears of misinformation or mistreatment, transgender individuals may fear being misgendered or deadnamed. "Patrons who are misgendered by library employees may not feel comfortable using the library; they may even stop doing so entirely and spread the word that the space is not trans-friendly. Most libraries put a lot of work into getting people in the door, and this clearly counters those efforts in a tangible way. It also directly conflicts with any rhetoric claiming that libraries are for everyone and that people of all backgrounds and identities are welcome. This language is common in the library profession; less common is the sincere work needed to make it true. Avoiding misgendering must be part of that work, and it should be incorporated into both individual behavior and institutional policy" (Krueger 16).

How can libraries practice this sincere work? Once again, the answer lies in diversity by design. In many cases, this work may involve redesigning library services to be inclusive, including inclusive language. Rather than using gendered terms, such as guy or girl, libraries can use gender inclusive language, such as student or patron. By doing so, libraries prevent misgendering patrons. "One should never guess at a person's preferred pronoun. When it comes to pronouns, it is better to allow users autonomy over their identities rather than impose your own preconceptions" (Smith-Borne 20).

In order to nurture this autonomy, library staff can encourage the use of preferred pronouns, modeling the practice in both written and verbal interactions. By including optional pronouns in email signatures, business cards, name tags, and verbal introductions, staff normalize the use of pronouns for everyone. "If cisgender people get used to stating their own pronouns, even though it may seem obvious or unnecessary, trans people won't be singled out by being the only ones to do so. This type of normalization is incredibly important, as it takes the

burden of bringing up pronouns off people who may not feel comfortable doing so if nobody else has" (Krueger and Matteson 212).

Just as preferred pronouns can be normalized, so can preferred names. "Knowing that they will be called by a name or pronoun that makes them uncomfortable may make people less willing to use library services, so the library should do everything in its power to use preferred names and pronouns" (Krueger and Matteson 212-213). By normalizing preferred names in library cards and library forms, transgender patrons may be more willing and more empowered to use library services.

Since some transgender individuals may change their legal name, a remote name change process can be another valuable service (Drake and Bielefield 165). Considering the risks of being deadnamed, misgendered, and mistreated at public desks, remote services can be invaluable for serving transgender individuals. These services typically offer more privacy than that afforded by a public service desk. For this reason, online chat can be an incredibly useful service, allowing reference questions to be answered in a "safely anonymous environment" (Krueger and Matteson 215). Self-checkout machines likewise provide this type of environment, offering "more privacy in the retrieval of information" (Lyttan and Laloo 57).

As libraries strive to meet the information needs of transgender patrons, it's important to emphasize that these needs are not static. For example, "the information needs of those in the process of coming out and those that have already come out are very different" (Lyttan and Laloo 48-49). Just as information needs may change over time for an individual, information needs may change over time for a society. As bathroom bills become commonplace and LGBTQ+ book bans become normalized, libraries must advocate not only for their services, but also for the transgender individuals who may seek out these services.

In order to provide stellar library services, libraries can partner with LGBTQ+ organizations. LGBTQ+ community members should never be tokenized or expected to speak for a community; instead, libraries can extend the invitation, empowering the community to determine their own degree of involvement. By inviting LGBTQ+ organizations, libraries can open the door for additional resources. Even more importantly, partnering with LGBTQ+ organizations – be they local or national – tells LGBTQ+ community members that "the library is interested in serving them" (Krueger and Matteson 210). Since transgender patrons far too often experience mistreatment in libraries, these partnerships may offer an opportunity to shift the perception of libraries from trans-exclusionary to trans-friendly.

In order to truly change this narrative, libraries must change themselves, continually designing and redesigning their spaces and their services. By working for and with LGBTQ+ individuals, communities, and organizations, libraries can embody the core value of social justice during a time when justice is greatly needed for transgender voices.

Annotated Bibliography

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> Drake and Bielefield conducted a study that surveyed adult transgender
>
> individuals. This study explores transgender information needs and ways that
>
> libraries can better accommodate these needs. Recommendations included
>
> sufficient transgender literature, gender-neutral bathrooms, gender-neutral
>
> language, remote library services, and policies that protect gender identity and
>
> gender expression.

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> Hughes-Hassell, Overberg, and Harris conducted a study of 125 high school
>
> libraries to explore student access to LGBTQ+ literature. The results
>
> demonstrated that schools under-collected LGBTQ+ literature. The article
>
> explores the barriers for LGBTQ+ collection development, the impact of
>
> LGBTQ+ literature on the student body, and the importance of advocating and
>
> integrating LGBTQ+ literature in library collections and library services.

Krueger, Stephen. *Supporting Trans People in Libraries*, ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2019. ProQuest

Ebook Central, ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/dom/detail.action?docID=5940286.

This book explores a wide variety of topics on serving transgender patrons and transgender employees in libraries.

Krueger, Stephen, and Miriam Matteson. "Serving Transgender Patrons in Academic Libraries." *Public Services Quarterly*, vol. 13, no. 3, July 2017, pp. 207–16. *EBSCOhost*, doi.org/10.1080/15228959.2017.1338543.

Krueger and Matteson explore best practices for serving transgender patrons in academic libraries. Recommended practices include the following: staff training on LGBTQ+ inclusion; normalizing gender-neutral language; normalizing preferred pronouns and preferred names; including gender-neutral restrooms; and including reference services that prioritize privacy, such as self-checkout machines and online reference chat.

Lyttan, Brandon, and Bikika Laloo. "Equitable Access to Information in Libraries: A Predicament for Transgender People." *Journal of Access Services*, vol. 17, no. 1, Jan. 2020, pp. 46–64. *EBSCOhost*, doi.org/10.1080/15367967.2019.1671850.

Lyttan and Laloo explores the issue of discrimination of transgender individuals in society and in libraries. The information needs of transgender individuals are discussed with the framework that these needs are neither static nor homogenous. Inclusive library services are thoroughly explored, including libraries as third spaces, gender-neutral restrooms, library collections, reference services, privacy protection, and staff training.

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> This article includes a case study of a public library's transgender and gender
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> noncomforming patrons. Based on the results, a strategic plan was developed to
>
> meet this community's information needs. Recommendations included the
>
> following: transgender-friendly bathroom policies; staff training; conducting a
>
> needs assessment of the LGBTQ+ community to develop programs for this
>
> community; and implementing remote processes for preferred names and legal
>
> name changes.

"Open to All: Serving the LGBTQIA+ Community in Your Library." American Library

Association Rainbow Round Table, 6 June 2022,

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> ALA's Rainbow Round Table discusses best practices for serving LGBTQ+
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> library users, coordinating LGBTQ+ programs, and building LGBTQ+
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> staff in these efforts.

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Gender Fluid Music Library Users." *Music Reference Services Quarterly*, vol. 22, no.

1/2, Apr. 2019, pp. 18–29. *EBSCOhost*, doi.org/10.1080/10588167.2018.1536691.

> This article provides recommendations for serving transgender and gender fluid
>
> patrons in music libraries. Recommendations include using gender-neutral

language, encouraging preferred pronouns, educating staff on LGBTQ+ issues, and collaborating with campus partners.

Stewart, Brenton, and Kaetrena Davis Kendrick. ""Hard to Find": Information Barriers among LGBT College Students." Aslib Journal of Information Management 71.5 (2019): 601-17. ProQuest. Web. Accessed 16 Dec. 2022.

> Stewart and Kendrick examine the role of academic libraries in meeting the information needs of undergraduate LGBTQ+ students. Information barriers affecting these students are explored, such as a lack of information, difficulty finding information, and inadequate information. Social stigma is explored as an institutional barrier affecting academic libraries, campuses, and most significantly, LGBTQ+ students.

Tyner, Madeline. "The CCBC's Diversity Statistics: Spotlight on LGBTQ+ Stories." *Horn Book Magazine*, 15 Nov. 2018, www.hbook.com/story/ccbcs-diversity-statistics-spotlight-lgbtq-stories. Accessed 16 Nov. 2022.

> Tyner analyzes LGBTQ+ representation in children's literature with the statistics from CCBC's 2017 Diversity Report. Analysis is conducted based on categories, such as picture books and fiction books, and queer identities, such as transgender and bisexual characters.

Wong, Petty, Miguel Figueroa, and Melissa Cardenas-Dow. "Diversity, Equity of Access, and Social Justice." *Information Services Today*, 2nd ed., edited by Sandra Hirsh. Rowman & Littlefield, 2018, pp. 52-68.

> This chapter explores the roles of diversity, equity, and social justice as integral functions of information organizations. Emphasis is given to the role of

communities in shaping information organizations and the role of information

organizing in supporting diverse communities.