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## Assuring diversity in our collections

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While speaking recently at an *Intellectual Freedom Institute* in Elko, Nevada, I was again struck with the realization that librarians are the number one censors of library materials. Librarians with their *Library Bill of Rights* and Banned Books Week celebrations? Yes, absolutely!

In 1992, the Oregon library community took a strong stand opposing the Oregon Citizens Alliance's (OCA) anti-homosexual ballot initiative. We did this because we

believed that the legislation would have mandated censorship of library collections. Librarians around the state worked on the campaign and are justly proud of their role in defeating the initiative.

The following year, the OCA's communications director challenged the Oregon Library Association to a debate. While we handily

"won"—after all, we had the First Amendment on our side—some of us squirmed when the OCA representative quite correctly pointed out that some of their materials weren't to be found in Oregon library collections.

As a profession, we haven't always done the world's best job of ensuring diversity in library collections. Libraries of all types are vulnerable to attack when their collections lack diversity and fail to represent the multiplicity of viewpoints that exist on all topics. There are myriad reasons for this type of library self-censorship. Of key importance is the fact that most libraries are continually underfunded, thus making acquisition of all needed and requested materials impossible. Also, many of the items that make collections diverse are not always of the highest quality in terms of content and construction. These factors alone provide librarians with at least a superficial rationale for overlooking a potentially controversial book in favor of a less controversial one. Harder to understand is the fact that some librarians say "Oh, no one here would read anything like that!"

At the Corvallis-Benton County Public Library we work hard to balance the collection to meet the varied and diverse needs and interests of the community. I personally find it much easier to defend a book in our collection when I can ask the patron if they are able to find items that interest them. Invariably, they answer yes.

We also ask patrons to help us build diverse collections by letting us know when they discover weaknesses. We aren't trying to shift our responsibility to them, but we know they often have access to publisher lists and titles of which we may be unaware.

Last year, another staff member and I scheduled an appointment with the local Pastor Prayer Fellowship to talk with them about getting collection development assistance. They were amazed that we were interested in building the collection with items they might recommend. But

even more amazing to them was the fact that we already owned most of the items on the lists they produced. Prior to this meeting they assumed we wouldn't have books of interest to them or their parishioners. Now they regularly send us new lists and they know that they and their congregations can find the materials they want at the library.

Does this mean, for example, that libraries should buy Scott Lively's (of the OCA) *The Pink Swastika*? Most likely, yes. For those who may not be aware, this book explains that "Homosexuals created the Nazi Party" and "Everything we think about the Nazis comes from the minds and the perverted ideas of homosexuals." It concludes by suggesting that "If someone calls you a Nazi, they are calling you a homosexual sadomasochistic pedophile."

Does collection diversity mean that all sides of all issues will be represented equally on the shelves of our libraries? Most likely, no. Balance will never mean having a circumscribed number of books on each side of a controversial issue. However, it does mean that continuing to build strong, diverse, and balanced collections must remain our number one priority.

Finally, the best way to celebrate the First Amendment and the role of librarians as nurturers of the public good is to offer our patrons a broad range of materials. And, the best way to minimize the effect of those who would mandate censorship in our libraries is to work in an inclusive way with all members of our communities. By so doing, we will not only build stronger libraries, we will build stronger communities as well. ☐

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