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Intellectual freedom on the front lines

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Why on earth do you have that horrible display up?" For those of us on the front lines of library work, questions like these are all too familiar. Unfortunately, few of us are prepared to offer a response. With Oregon holding the honor of being the state with the largest number of challenges to materials, those of us on the front line need to prepare ourselves to answer questions such as this.

The Office for Intellectual Freedom, American Library Association (ALA) and Candy Morgan, ALA-IF Chair, offer the following bits of advice for dealing with patron concerns and challenges within your library.

- First and foremost, be prepared! Learn and understand U.S. and Oregon constitutional principles. Learn your library's policies and your responsibilities when faced with a challenge. Morgan suggests that you "seek out what is offensive to you and defend its place in the library." This is a great way to learn to defend challenged material.

- Maintain a clearly defined method for handling complaints. Create a policy that explains, step by step, what to do in the event of a challenge. Your policies should address all areas within your library, including library materials, computers, displays, bulletin boards and meeting areas. ALA suggests, "The complaint must be filed in writing and the complainant must be properly identified before action is taken." If your policy dictates that the patron fill out any paperwork, ensure that he or she receives a timely response.

- Maintain familiarity with intellectual freedom principles. Read and understand the ALA Code of Ethics and the ALA Library Bill of Rights. Read the *Intellectual Freedom Manual.*

- Maintain a materials selection policy and a collection development policy. Both should address all library mediums (including computer software and the internet) and be approved by the appropriate governing authority.

- Maintain inservice training of staff, administration, and boards. Make certain all levels of your staff, including students and volunteers, know the principles of intellectual freedom as well as the process for dealing with challenges. If training is not offered by your library, seek out that training yourself. Find a current copy of ALA's *Intellectual Freedom Manual* and see what it has to say. Inside, you will find the ALA Code of Ethics, the ALA Library Bill of Rights and a plethora of information to help you deal with concerns and challenges. Attend classes and conferences on the subject. If none are available in your community, see if you can bring a speaker in or if you can create a staff training session yourself.

- Maintain lines of communication with community and institutional leaders, such as your board of trustees, college president, and civic leaders. Presentations by library staff or board members to these groups can be a wonderful opportunity to illustrate your library mission and selection process. The staff can also emphasize intellectual freedom principles and their importance to your library.

- Contact the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom and your state intellectual freedom committee or resource center to inform them of the complaint and to enlist their support. They may be able to offer some advice or refer you to local organizations that may assistance you further.

Because of the new emphasis on internet resources in many libraries, the web has become another area of concern for library staffers on the front line. Two ideas for dealing with the web and potential concerns: Add privacy screens to your monitors and move terminals out of high traffic areas. (Although, some people believe that putting them in a high traffic area deters patrons from connecting to "graphic" sites).

Beyond the fundamental elements for dealing with a challenge is the ability to defuse the situation when the person is actually speaking to you face to face. How you behave when interacting with a patron may determine whether the situation escalates.

When a patron comes to you with a complaint, remain calm. Do not personalize the challenge, and keep your temper in check. Pay attention to your body language and facial expressions – try to remain neutral in appearance. Listen carefully to his or her concerns regarding the item and take them seriously, no matter how unusual or trivial they may seem to you.

It's important not to become drawn into a philosophical debate with the patron. It is unlikely that you would be able to change his or her opinion and it is not your place to try. Instead, stick with the basics of intellectual freedom and explain your library's policy, procedure and process for dealing with a challenge. Offer the patron your *Request for Reconsideration of Library Resources* form (or a similar form) and any accompanying literature you might have.

Student Employment

as busy work and unimportant. "An average student aide needs at least two months of work training before he/she starts performing quite efficiently." (Frank,1984). Has the increase of computer technology in libraries since 1984 extended or shortened the learning curve for student workers? This is a question that could be investigated. Computers and videos could be used as training tools for students. They could be developed as tutorial programs that are always available for training and review.

Students receive training in public awareness, the libraries' call number systems, computer systems used by the library, other computer software, phone etiquette, reference and circulation duties, shelving, shelf reading and other task-appropriate instructions. The amount and variety of training depends on the library that employs the students. Only three libraries reported having student manuals available for training and communicating with the students. Another three libraries hold orientation sessions for new student employees that last from one to four hours.

Student workers are an important part of operating libraries. How we train, recruit, compensate, and allocate students is an essential part in improving the library's service to our clientele.

For more information about student employees in academic libraries, I suggest reading Susan Marks and David Gregory's annotated bibliography "*Student Employment in Academic Libraries: Recommended Readings and Resources*," published in the *Journal of Library Administration*.

The surveys received have been very interesting and informative. If you would like to add your library to the research findings please contact me at OHSU library: (503) 494-3220 or johnsnli@ohsu.edu. ◘

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Freedom

A friend and colleague, Katherine Stevens of Portland Community College, had an experience that led me to select the opening line of this article. In her library they had a display, sponsored by their campus gay and lesbian club, featuring materials available on gays and lesbians, such as literature, sociology and psychology texts. A couple approached Stevens and asked why this display was in the library.

Stevens listened carefully to their concerns and informed them of PCC library's selection and display policies. She offered them the library's suggestion form and referred them on to a reference librarian. Because Stevens recognized their right to have concerns and took the time to inform them of her library's mission, which included protecting intellectual freedom, the situation was quickly defused. She was prepared, informed, and confident in her library's policies, mission, and philosophy. Because of this, the patrons took no further action.

This scenario is just one example that illustrates why it is important for your library to have policies in place that address intellectual freedom, as well as why you and your staff need to be well informed on the subject. If you do not know your library's policies and procedures, learn them. If they do not exist, start the wheels turning to get them established. It's a step that will make your work-life easier down the road, and ensure a better library for your patrons. ◘