Providing Inclusive Services to Transgender Customers

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While most librarians attempt to adhere to the principles defined in the ALA Core Values of Librarianship and the Library Bill of Rights, unconscious bias among library staff – whether in collection development or user services – can have a negative impact on marginalized populations (Gough & Greenblatt, 2011, 169). In the current social climate, transgender customers are particularly vulnerable to biases that can make our libraries feel unwelcoming. The TX-Gender Project for Libraries was established at the University of North Texas to provide research-based resources to help Texas libraries be safe and welcoming places for transgender visitors.

Transgender people face a startling degree of harassment and discrimination. In a recent national survey, transgender respondents reported being "denied equal treatment or service, verbally harassed, or physically attacked at many places of public accommodation." 20% of national respondents avoided using some form of public accommodation because of anxiety about harassment (USTS, 14); and among Texas respondents to this survey, 60% avoided public restrooms out of fear of confrontation (USTS-TX, 2).

With help from the Texas Library Association Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender (GLBT) Roundtable, we surveyed Texas librarians to evaluate their understanding of transgender issues and their access to professional development resources on serving lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ) customers. In a parallel survey, we asked transgender library users about their information seeking needs and behaviors and their experiences in libraries.

Transgender respondents report that 53% have been misgendered – addressed as the wrong gender – by a library staff member, sometimes deliberately. While respondents still see libraries as valuable sources for information, 59% are afraid of "outing" or disclosure when seeking LGBTQ-related resources in libraries. Although 35% have had positive experiences in libraries where their gender was a factor, 41% report negative experiences in libraries where gender was a factor. Texas libraries have some work to do to provide inclusive services to this population.

Among our library respondents, 66% know a transgender person, but a significant percentage lack knowledge or express misunderstanding about transgender issues. For example, 34% believe there is a direct correlation between gender identity (how a person identifies as male, female, or non-binary, regardless of sex assigned at birth) and sexual orientation (the gender to which a person is attracted). Transgender people can identify as straight, gay, bi, or asexual, regardless of their gender identity (Schulz, 197).

Further, most respondents do not have access to Ally or other LGBTQ-related training to help bridge these gaps in their understanding. Among public librarians responding to the survey, 82% do not have access to training on LGBTQ issues through their institutions. Filling in this training gap could go a long way to address the negative experiences transgender people report having in libraries. Increasing diversity among our staff members could help as well. 76% of user respondents report they are more likely to approach a library staff member if they know that person identifies as LGBTQ.

Transgender people are increasingly turning to the internet for information about medical, legal, and social aspects of their lived experience. Librarians can help these customers find and evaluate information and access resources through our libraries, if we build trust and demonstrate that our libraries are safe and welcoming to all. We can do this by providing training to our staff on inclusive services and by conducting outreach to LGBTQ centers, churches, and organizations to let that community know what is available in their Texas libraries.

For more information on the TX-Gender Project for Libraries, visit txgenderproject.org

Five Tips for Providing Inclusive Service:

1. Don't assume you know a user's gender, and don't assume you need to know. Gender is not germane to most library interactions.

2. Use gender neutral language. Avoid "Sir" or "Ma'am," and use the singular "they" when referring to visitors in the third-person. Become familiar with the vernacular of trans communities to avoid verbal missteps (see Shultz, 195-205). And remember, "y'all" is gender neutral.

3. Know your library's policies for allowing preferred names on library cards. If customers can't choose what name is on their card, consider changing the policy. Always address users by their preferred name. It's okay to ask how a customer wants to be addressed.

4. Respect user privacy. Do not discuss a user's gender among library staff or with others. Don't comment on

materials customers bring to the desk. Allow visitors to use restrooms at their own discretion without comment or disclosure.

5. Conduct proactive community outreach. Create displays and exhibits of materials in your collections for Pride Month and Transgender Day of Awareness. Ask local organizations for training for your staff. Communicate with LGBTQ organizations about the resources and services your library offers.

Resources

- Texas Library Association GLBT Roundtable. www.txla.org/groups/GLBTRT "Works to inspire Texans to affirm and celebrate GLBT-inclusive programs, services, and collections in libraries and communities."
- American Library Association. 2008. "Access to Library Resources and Services Regardless of Sex, Gender Identity, Gender Expression, or Sexual Orientation: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights."
- American Library Association. 2004. "Core Values of Librarianship." www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/corevalues
- Equality Texas www.equalitytexas.org/ Statewide organization providing public education and advocacy on LGBTQ issues.
- Southern Poverty Law Center. LGBT Rights. www.splcenter.org/issues/lgbt-rights

Bibliography

- Gough, C. & Greenblatt, E. 2011. "Barriers to selecting materials about sexual and gender diversity." In Serving LGBTIQ library and archives users: Essays on outreach, service, collections and access, edited by E. Greenblatt, pp. 165-173. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers.
- National Center for Transgender Equality. "Executive Summary from the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey." http://www.ustranssurvey.org/
- National Center for Transgender Equality. "Texas State Report from the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey." Shultz, Jackson Wright. 2015. Trans/Portraits: Voices from Transgender Communities. Dartmouth College Press. ✪
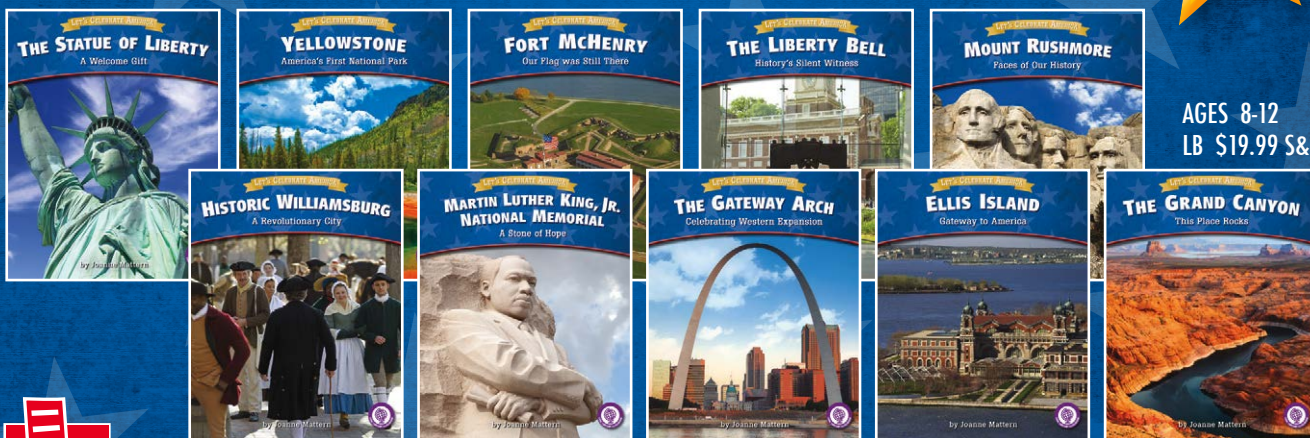
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