

July 2014

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Recommended Citation

Oberg, L. R., & Klein, G. M. (2014). Gay-Themed Books in Oregon Public and Academic Libraries. *OLA Quarterly*, 9(2), 8-12. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/1093-7374.1644>

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OLA Quarterly is an official publication of the Oregon Library Association | ISSN 1093-7374

Gay-Themed Books in Oregon Public and Academic Libraries:

A Brief Historical Overview

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Introduction

The publication of gay-themed books that document the everyday lives and history of gay men and women and their place in this and other societies has witnessed enormous growth over the past few decades. In 1950, a young person who came to an Oregon public or academic library to write a paper or seek answers to troubling questions about sexual orientation would have found fewer than 20 titles listed in any subject catalog in the state, and, in many, none at all. The listed books would have presented homosexuality as a medical or psychological condition, something to be repressed or, better yet, “cured.” Asking for help at the reference desk might have turned up a few additional titles available elsewhere, but the stigma attached to the topic most often ensured that our young patron’s search would be limited to a furtive glance at the card catalog and the “h” volume of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

In most medium-to-large Oregon libraries today, patrons find listings for hundreds of gay-themed books under a wide range of relevant subject headings. They also find knowledgeable and enthusiastic librarians to help them pursue searches in large consortial catalogs and other Web-based resources. Were the librarian to guide today’s patron to OCLC’s WorldCat, they would discover nearly 25,000 unique English-language titles on gay-themed topics classified under no fewer than 240 relevant subject headings. Librarians today have a wide range of professional and bibliographic resources at their disposal to ensure that they become informed guides to this literature.

This study does not answer all of the questions librarians might ask about building collections and providing services in support of the gay community, but it does provide a current snapshot of gay-themed collections in Oregon libraries. It also offers suggestions and a rationale for building these collections and lists resources of use to librarians.

Study Design

The present study is designed to assess the strengths of gay-themed collections in Oregon libraries and to determine if libraries of different types, sizes, and locations share common collecting patterns. The authors also sought to understand how Oregon libraries are responding to the needs of Oregon’s GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender) communities and, by extension, to the rapid growth of the literature on gay-themed topics over the past decades. The authors did not include periodicals, videos, and other non-book materials within this survey’s scope. Nor did they seek to determine the proportion of pro- to anti-gay titles or the “quality” of these collections. Because of the subjectivity involved in determining if a novel is, or is not, a “gay” novel, fiction is also excluded.

Methodology

Using a single search statement for each of the 60 libraries and library systems surveyed, on March 26, 2003, the authors queried OCLC’s WorldCat database to determine how many of the English language book titles these libraries held cover lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender topics. Working through the FirstSearch platform, they used the WorldCat database to obtain uniform access to the libraries’ holdings. The combination of the WorldCat database and the FirstSearch search engine made possible the use of a single, albeit complex, search statement of more than 100 characters, a search string that would not have been executable on most online public access catalogs. Unlike local catalogs, which can include unique or undocumented processing options, the WorldCat database offers a consistent protocol for searching bibliographic records.

To facilitate comparison, the libraries surveyed were divided into five categories: state-supported academic libraries, private nonreligious colleges and universities, private religious colleges, community colleges, and



public libraries and library systems. Several of these institutions (George Fox University, Lewis and Clark College, University of Oregon, Willamette University, and Portland Community College) had multiple OCLC holding codes in WorldCat. Database queries for these institutions were performed against all of their OCLC symbols.

To minimize false hits, the search string adopted was tested extensively by performing keyword searches of the subject headings field using wild cards to capture variations of major words. By focusing on subject heading fields, it was possible to avoid retrieving such non-GLBT phrases as “the gay nineties” which appear frequently in title and contents fields. The query statement also incorporated a tool to minimize possibly including personal authors whose first, middle, or last name is “gay.” The search formulation is: (su: gay* or su: lesbian* or su: bisexual* or su: transsexual* or su: transvesti* or su: transgender* or su: homophob* or su: homosexual* or su: heterosex*) not (pn: gay) and ln= “eng” and dt: “bks.”

The authors used the WorldCat

database to separate the records retrieved by publication dates and group them by decade from the 1940s forward. (Earlier imprint dates are consolidated as “pre-1940s.”) In order to facilitate comparisons, the authors sought current enrollment statistics for each academic institution and current population statistics for each public library and library district.

The authors required that every library or library system selected for the survey 1) serve an Oregon institution of higher education, or serve the citizens of Oregon as a public library; 2) hold current membership in the OCLC consortium; and 3) store their bibliographic holdings information in OCLC’s WorldCat database. Because a large number of public libraries in Oregon do not place their bibliographic holdings directly in WorldCat, the authors chose 18 public library systems, with holdings listed in WorldCat, to represent the state’s 143 public libraries and library systems. This is a search strategy and research methodology that would lend itself to replication, not only for GLBT literature, but in many other subject areas as well.

Figure 1
Number of unique titles of gay-themed books written in English,
cataloged in OCLC, by year of publication
 (compiled March 26, 2003)

	<i>all years</i>	<i>2000-03</i>	<i>1990-99</i>	<i>1980-89</i>	<i>1970-79</i>	<i>1960-69</i>	<i>1950-59</i>	<i>1940-49</i>	<i>pre1940</i>
(percentages are computed separately for each time span)									
43,659 libraries worldwide									
in OCLC	24,128	3,735	11,120	4,199	2,812	1,483	336	81	362
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
all 60 institutions surveyed									
in Oregon	6,224	977	3,523	1,073	454	109	52	10	26
% of OCLC holdings	25.8%	26.2%	31.7%	25.6%	16.1%	7.3%	15.5%	12.3%	7.2%
ORBIS consortium members									
in Oregon	4,291	587	2,362	797	366	100	48	8	23
% of OCLC holdings	17.8%	15.7%	21.2%	19.0%	13.0%	6.7%	14.3%	9.9%	6.4%
OPALL consortium members									
in Oregon	499	32	202	133	95	23	12	0	2
% of OCLC holdings	2.1%	0.9%	1.8%	3.2%	3.4%	1.6%	3.6%	0.0%	0.6%

The complete dataset for all 60 institutions surveyed is available as an Excel spreadsheet from:

<http://www.willamette.edu/~gklein/GLBT-details.xls>

Study Results

- The libraries included in this survey collectively own 25.8 percent of all English-language gay-themed books cataloged in the OCLC WorldCat database.
- State-supported academic libraries, as a class, provide access to 15 percent of the English-language gay-themed books cataloged in the database. Larger Oregon libraries own disproportionately more gay-themed books than smaller libraries. (This finding holds true in each of the five categories of libraries surveyed.)
- Private religious college libraries in Oregon, in the aggregate, own fewer gay-themed books than any of the other four categories surveyed.
- Individual community college libraries in Oregon, on the average, own fewer gay-themed books than libraries in the other four categories. (The average community college library owns 69 gay-themed books. The averages for other categories are: private religious colleges, 86; public libraries, 206; private nonreligious colleges and universities, 250; state colleges and universities, 508.)
- The size of the gay-themed book collections owned by individual Oregon libraries varies greatly within each of the five categories surveyed. (This continues to hold true when population size and institutional mission are taken into consideration.)
- A comparison of the publication dates of the gay-themed books held by Oregon libraries confirms a dramatic increase in this literature over the past several decades.

Conclusions

Academic and public libraries located in traditionally liberal areas, Portland, Corvallis, Eugene, and Ashland, for example, tend to have the largest gay-themed collections. Libraries in traditionally conservative areas tend to have the smallest. A few libraries, however, do not conform to this pattern and have surprisingly large collections for their size, category, or location. Two-thirds of all gay-themed titles in the private nonreligious college and university category, for example, are held by a single library (Willamette University) and 35 percent of the titles owned by the private religious colleges are held by one library (University of Portland). It may be hypothesized that these libraries are conscientiously choosing to develop these collections or that individual librarians and faculty selectors are leaving their mark.

It is significant that although Oregon accounts for only one percent of the nation's population, its libraries hold 25 percent of the nation's gay-themed books. Like the collections themselves, access has improved greatly since our young student first searched the subject catalog back in the 1950s. Today, consolidated access to branch, satellite and departmental collections facilitates local searching; online access to other library catalogs in the region, state, and nation is commonly available; and regional consortial catalogs, Pioneer, OPALL, and Orbis, for example, assure rapid delivery of vast quantities of common holdings. To depend upon "the kindness of strangers" in order to avoid collecting these materials locally, however, is a violation of our professional obligation. If we do not systematically and adequately collect gay-themed materials, we ignore a literature of growing importance and the immediate needs of a considerable segment of our user community.



Figure 2
 Number of unique titles of gay-themed books, written in English,
 cataloged in OCLC (compiled March 26, 2003)

	<i>Fall 2001 enrollment</i>	<i># gbt books</i>	<i>% of OCLC</i>		<i>Population served</i>	<i># gbt books</i>	<i>% of OCLC</i>
<u>State supported institutions</u>	73,375	3,556	14.7%	<u>Public library systems</u>		3,703	15.3%
Eastern Oregon University	2,971	147	0.6%	Albany PL	41,650	284	1.2%
Oregon Institute of Technology	3,070	53	0.2%	Chemeketa Coop Reg L	n/a	125	0.5%
Oregon State University	18,013	1,272	5.3%	Coos Bay PL	26,301	415	1.7%
Portland State University	20,024	1,543	6.4%	Corvallis-Benton PL	79,000	1,369	5.7%
Southern Oregon University	5,465	683	2.8%	Dalles-Wasco Co PL	21,017	0	0.0%
University of Oregon	18,956	2,597	10.8%	Deschutes Co PL	122,050	382	1.6%
Western Oregon University	4,876	199	0.8%	Douglas Co L	101,200	307	1.3%
				Eugene PL	140,550	1,272	5.3%
<u>Private nonreligious colleges</u>	13,366	2,501	10.4%	Hood River Co PL	7,000	10	0.0%
Lewis & Clark College	2,947	816	3.4%	Jackson Co L	184,700	587	2.4%
Linfield College	2,542	458	1.9%	Josephine Co L	76,850	189	0.8%
Marylhurst University	937	159	0.7%	Klamath Co L	64,200	208	0.9%
Nat'l Col. of Naturopathic Medicine	459	13	0.1%	Lib Info Net Clackamas Co	n/a	821	3.4%
Oregon Graduate Institute	see OHSU	0	0.0%	Lincoln Co L Dist	n/a	283	1.2%
Oregon Health & Science Univ.	1976	65	0.3%	Multnomah Co L	666,350	2,484	10.3%
Pacific University	2,293	312	1.3%	Salem PL	139,320	724	3.0%
Reed College	1,420	599	2.5%	Tillamook Co L	24,600	177	0.7%
Western States Chiropractic Col.	331	1	0.0%	Washington Co Coop L	n/a	1,094	4.5%
Willamette University	2,437	1,667	6.9%				
<u>Private religious colleges</u>	9,869	864	3.6%				
Cascade College	330	3	0.0%				
Concordia University	1,040	97	0.4%				
George Fox University	2,637	214	0.9%				
Mt Angel Seminary	155	170	0.7%				
Multnomah Bible College	844	100	0.4%				
Northwest Christian College	480	58	0.2%				
University of Portland	3,087	331	1.4%				
Warner Pacific College	571	66	0.3%				
Western Baptist College	725	34	0.1%				
Western Seminary	n/a	118	0.5%				
<u>Community colleges</u>	85,468	1,034	4.3%				
Blue Mountain CC	2,143	56	0.2%				
Central Oregon CC	4,452	155	0.6%				
Chemeketa CC	10,762	110	0.5%				
Clackamas CC	6,715	89	0.4%				
Clatsop CC	1,522	63	0.3%				
Columbia Gorge CC	793	88	0.4%				
Lane CC	10,737	133	0.6%				
Linn-Benton CC	4,747	87	0.4%				
Mt Hood CC	8,771	37	0.2%				
Oregon Coast CC	416	8	0.0%				
Portland CC	24,882	486	2.0%				
Rogue CC	4,343	41	0.2%				
Southwestern Oregon CC	3,194	31	0.1%				
Treasure Valley CC	550	31	0.1%				
Umpqua CC	1,441	60	0.2%				

Fall 2001 enrollment data from Oregon Student Assistance Commission, Office of Degree Authorization.

http://www.osscc.state.or.us/oda/enrollment_2001.html

Population data obtained from "Directory of Oregon Public & Volunteer Libraries, 2002."


<http://www.osl.state.or.us/home/libdev/pldir.htm>

Recommendations and Resources

The following are recommendations and resources for building a collection of gay-themed materials. Depending upon the size of the gay community served, the curriculum of the school, and the research needs of the community, a few or many of these suggestions will be appropriate to a particular library.

- Conduct an environmental scan to determine the need for gay-themed materials that satisfy community, curricular, student and research requirements.
- Add GLBT literature to the collection development policy statement.
- Allocate resources for the purchase of gay-themed materials.
- Assign responsibility for the selection of gay-themed materials to selectors held accountable for filling gaps and building the current collection.
- Remember that available gay-themed materials are highly diverse. Consider the various types and their importance to your clientele, e.g., the coming out process, guides for parents of gay and lesbian children, gay history, fiction that treats GLBT topics.
- Build awareness of the GLBT literature amongst subject selectors.
- Solicit suggestions for the purchase of gay-themed materials from local organizations serving the GLBT community.
- Prepare bibliographies and publicize gay-themed materials.
- Collect at an appropriate level; do not force patrons to rely unduly upon ILL or consortial collections.
- Use commonly consulted selection tools to identify gay-themed materials,

e.g., *Library Journal*, *American Libraries*, *Publishers Weekly*, *Choice*, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Book Review Digest*. Use specialized resources, e.g., *Gay and Lesbian Review Worldwide*, *Alternative Press Index*, to develop more comprehensive collections.

- Use the Lambda Literary Awards and the American Library Association's Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, & Transgendered Round Table's Book Award lists as buying guides.
- Include the gay biweekly news magazine, *The Advocate*, in your collection. It is a useful resource for readers and selectors alike. 

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