

Sara Wood

Library and Information Science Graduate Student · University of Kentucky
3900 Crosby Drive, Lexington, KY 40515 · (270) 703-4325 · sara.wood@uky.edu

Presentation Format: Poster

Title: Overcoming the Censorship of GLBT Materials in Public Libraries

Abstract:

Libraries have a unique opportunity to serve all members of a community, including gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender (GLBT) members. After a review of literature, it is clear members of this community have an urgent information need, and the public library is the primary source. These information materials continue to be the most challenged in public libraries and are often underrepresented. This preliminary research is an attempt to understand the history of GLBT material censorship, provide instances of real-life controversy, and discuss how public libraries balance their missions and this controversial material. Informal survey research is included to provide feedback from public librarians in Kentucky. This is a work in progress with hopes to be used to develop better practices and policies regarding GLBT collections.

Description:

GLBT materials have long been subject to burnings, misclassifications, and removal. Subject headings have categorized homosexual materials as “criminal behavior,” “mental illness,” and “perversion.” Historically, libraries have lacked this subject matter in an effort to avoid controversial literature and because of their endorsement as a moral censor. Because of this history, archives and historical materials are virtually non-existent.

The First Amendment has since helped protect GLBT and other sexual materials, but mostly for adults. Current obscenity laws are full of subjective terms such as “a reasonable person” and “contemporary adult community standards.” This leaves room for gaps in a collection concerning the information needs of GLBT teens and young adults. Research shows this population is a high-risk group often becoming victims of violence, bullying, harassment, homelessness, substance abuse, and suicide. Due to federal funding guidelines and the history of abstinence-only sex education in public schools, health issues involving GLBT topics are often left out or negatively addressed. The public library becomes the go-to source for GLBT youth information.

The need for this information is obvious. However, without clear definition and guidance, GLBT materials are challenged in controversies that often escalate to book burnings and board dismissals, as is the case with the West Bend Community Memorial Library in Wisconsin. A similar case in Florida ended with the Hillsborough County Commission voting to ban the acknowledgement of gay pride in response to a gay book display at the library. Hillsborough County received censure from the Florida and

American Library Associations. While these examples are extremes, changes in the collections and policies concerning these materials could help relieve the escalation and associated stress. Despite challenges some libraries receive, a number of libraries do not even have materials for this population. Research shows a number of possible reasons, such as a library's misconception their service community does not include a GLBT population or that library's often attempt to self-censor their selections to avoid controversies. Some libraries also view their community as too conservative or do not collect materials because they do not receive patron requests. Also, library selectors are not void of personal biases and prejudices. These misconceptions often leave the GLBT collection as non-existent or lacking.

Feedback from Kentucky public librarians as well as a review of literature provides some insight into possible suggestions for increasing GLBT collections and the understanding of the community. Possible suggestions include educating the community, personalizing the issue, offering meeting spaces for GLBT groups, creating a written policy, informing staff about challenge procedures, and reaching out to local groups. Because this population is often targeted for harassment, patrons may not feel comfortable requesting items. To combat this, libraries can reach out to local schools and guidance counselors as these sources have valuable information on the pulse of the public school community. There are a number of resources available from organizations such as the ALA's GLBT Round Table which provides recommended titles by age group. Titles include fiction and nonfiction titles to provide identity formation role models and historical, factual, and cultural information. If appropriate steps are taken, GLBT collections can grow and be displayed in libraries while minimizing resistance.