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Serving Transgender Patrons in Academic Libraries

Stephen Krueger, UNC Chapel Hill

Introduction

Though libraries talk a great deal about diversity and inclusion, implementing the theory can sometimes be more complicated. As Jardine (2013) points out, “there seems little point in providing resources for trans* patrons if no trans* patrons will come into the library to use them” (p. 244). This article seeks to offer solutions to that problem. I start by covering some of the federal legislation and professional policies that apply to the service of trans* people in libraries. Then I suggest ideas for educating library staff on equity and inclusion, specifically in the context of the LGBTQ+ community. Finally, I outline concrete ways in which access services departments in academic libraries can make trans* patrons feel welcome and supported.

A Note on Language

This article will use the term *trans**, going by the following definition. “Trans* is one word for a variety of identities that are incredibly diverse, but share one simple, common denominator: a trans* person is not your traditional cisgender wo/man. Beyond that, there is a lot of variation” (Killermann, 2015). It should be noted that not all non-cisgender people use this term; as will be reiterated later, communication with one’s local community and LGBTQ+ Center is essential to meet their particular needs.

Personal Perspective and Bias

The author is a transgender Library and Information Science student who works in academic libraries. He uses male pronouns.

Legislation and Policy

There are any number of reasons for a library to do everything possible to support its trans* patrons. Moral and social good seem like the obvious general ones; in addition, there are many legal and professional standards. Title IX of the US Education Amendments of 1972 and codified at 20 U.S.C. 1681-1688 states that “No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance” (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.). In a document released by the Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights, clarifications on the application of Title IX included the following statement:

Title IX’s sex discrimination prohibition extends to claims of discrimination based on gender identity or failure to conform to stereotypical notions of masculinity or femininity and OCR accepts such complaints for investigation. Similarly, the actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity of the parties does not change a school’s obligations. (U.S. Department of Education, 2014)

The current political climate (that is, since the 2016 election) has resulted in a rather different environment; a letter issued by the Departments of Justice and Education rescinded the guidelines that included gender identity under Title IX, though they did not provide any to replace them (United States Department of Justice & United States Department of Education, 2017).

Federal legislation aside, library organizations have left little room for ambiguity in their official policies. The American Library Association’s Library Bill of Rights declares this:

Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves...A person's right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views.

(American Library Association, n.d.a)

In section B.3.3. of the ALA policy manual, "Combating Prejudice, Stereotyping, and Discrimination" (American Library Association, n.d.b) the organization explicitly "commits its programs and resources to those efforts that combat prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination against individuals and groups in the library profession and in library user populations on the basis of...gender identity [and] gender expression." Section B.2.15, "Access to Library Resources and Services Regardless of Sex, Gender Identity, Gender Expression, or Sexual Orientation" (American Library Association, n.d.b), "stringently and unequivocally maintains that libraries and librarians have an obligation to resist efforts that systematically exclude materials dealing with any subject matter, including sex, gender identity or expression, or sexual orientation." These policies leave no doubt that the support of trans* patrons, through services as well as collections, is an essential part of library work. In addition, many of the schools that academic libraries serve have diversity or inclusion statements, and libraries may have their own.

Continuing Education for Librarians

While some librarians may learn about the needs of their trans* patrons while in school or through other avenues outside of work, many may be unfamiliar with this community. There are a number of options available for continuing education for library faculty and staff. Reaching out to staff in the LGBTQ+ Center or equivalent on campus is an excellent start. In addition to the resources and advice they may provide, establishing connections lets the campus community

know that the library is interested in serving them. If no such center exists, local organizations (usually on the town or city level) can be used the same way. National organizations such as [PFLAG](#) have local chapters across the United States (PFLAG, 2017). Even if no nearby resources can be found, new chapters can be started and non-local groups can be contacted for information.

Participation in workshops or trainings is another way for librarians to learn about the trans* community. [Safe Zone](#) is a workshop designed to educate people about LGBTQ+ rights and allyship. The Safe Zone Project also offers consultations, trainings, and activities for people who want to facilitate their own workshops (Safe Zone Project, n.d.). People who complete Safe Zone training receive, if they want to, a placard with their name stating that they are Safe Zone-certified (and thus a safe person to talk to about LGBTQ+ issues). Publicizing the training by posting the signs on people's office doors and noting in the staff directory who has gone through it shows community members that the library supports its LGBTQ+ patrons.

Libraries can also distribute information to their staff for more informal training. The website [Transwhat?](#) provides basic information and guidelines on allyship (*Transwhat? A guide towards allyship*, n.d.). PFLAG's [Guide to Being a Trans Ally](#) is a much more extensive document written in an informal and approachable style (PFLAG, n.d.). An important part of allyship is developing awareness of one's own privilege. Resources such as [30+ Examples of Cisgender Privilege](#) (Killermann, 2017) can act as starters for individual awareness and group discussion. For more specific issues, pages such as [FAQ: Answers to some common questions about equal access to public restrooms](#) (Lambda Legal, n.d.) are designed to spread information and awareness about the experiences and needs of the trans* community.

These are only a few examples of organizations and resources that can be used for continuing education of librarians on trans* issues. Libraries can use whatever combination of these or others works best for their institution, from formal trainings to staff discussions to assigned or recommended readings. Perhaps the most important step is conveying to all library staff that supporting trans* patrons is an essential part of their work and providing them with their own support, in the form of community as well as information, for learning how to do so.

Practical Support

Once the library and its staff have committed to supporting their trans* patrons, there are any number of practical ways in which to do so. This section will focus on access services in academic libraries, but many of the ideas apply to other contexts (such as public libraries or museums) as well. For technical services, the methods below can supplement work such as collecting materials with specific community needs in mind and using preferred language in cataloging. Even if some of these ideas are financially or otherwise difficult to realize, there are many ways for any library to actively support its trans* community.

Normalizing Trans Identities through Language*

One of the simplest ways to support trans* people is through language. This may take some practice but requires no financial investment, so any library can start doing it immediately if it has not already.

Libraries should use inclusive language in their promotional literature by replacing man and/or woman with gender neutral language such customer, client, or patron. Similarly, this literature should use gender neutral pronouns such as they and their. Patrons asked to

fill out paperwork that have the designations of Mr. or Mrs. may feel disregarded and with no means to self-identify as they see fit. (Marquez, 2014)

In official library literature, gendered language should be removed and replaced with neutral terms unless it addresses only those of a specific gender identity. If automated messages such as hold or overdue notices include gendered salutations (Mr./Ms.), remove them entirely. Library staff should be trained follow the same practices in written and verbal interactions; for example, calling out ‘Sir’ or ‘Ma’am’ to get someone’s attention should be avoided, as should referring to groups as ‘ladies,’ ‘gentlemen,’ or both (unless the staff member is certain of the way everyone involved prefers to be addressed, but that is not usually the case). Removing assumptions that a) everyone fits into a gender binary and b) a person’s gender can be determined based on their appearance or legal name is an essential step in making trans* people feel more comfortable.

Another way to support trans* people through language is to publicly and explicitly declare that they are welcome. Ideally, nobody would need specific confirmation that they are welcome in a library, but many trans* people (similar to people in other marginalized groups) may not be able to assume that. Therefore, if the library has a diversity or inclusion statement (which is a good idea), it should include explicit language stating that all gender identities and gender expressions are welcome. More specifically, it can affirm that they (along with other marginalized groups) will receive equal access to all library services and resources. While general statements declaring that all are welcome sound nice, statements that are more specific demonstrate that the library has truly thought about groups that may otherwise feel overlooked or uninvited. Publicizing the statement, both in physical spaces and on the library website, shows both trans* people and others that they are part of the library community and have a right to its services.

Inviting people to define their own pronouns is an important day-to-day element of supporting trans* people. All introductions, whether one-on-one or in groups such as trainings or classes, should include pronouns. This is very simple if the person starting, often a librarian or teacher, sets the precedent: “My name is Stephen, and my pronouns are he/him/his.” If cisgender people get used to stating their own pronouns, even though it may seem obvious or unnecessary, trans* people won’t be singled out by being the only ones to do so. This type of normalization is incredibly important, as it takes the burden of bringing up pronouns off people who may not feel comfortable doing so if nobody else has. Staff name tags, email signatures, and directory entries should include preferred pronouns as well.

According to the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey, “only 11% of respondents reported that all of their IDs had the name and gender they preferred, while more than two-thirds (68%) reported that none of their IDs had the name and gender they preferred” (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2016). Changing one’s legal name is a complicated process; depending on the state, changing the legal gender can be even more so. This means that many trans* people may not be comfortable with the name and gender that automatically show up in the university records system, the learning management system, or the integrated library system (ILS). While academic libraries may have to use the legal name provided by the school, they should check to see if their ILS can be set to use the patron’s preferred name instead. Some schools now allow the student to use a preferred name in their online learning management systems and emails, and the library should be set up to do the same. If this is not possible, then library staff can encourage the software providers to change the system to make it so. Until then, staff should be made aware that the name appearing on the screen or ID may not be what the patron is comfortable being called. This applies to everything from circulation to class rosters to online accounts. Knowing

that they will be called by a name or pronoun that makes them uncomfortable may make people less willing to use library services, so the library should do everything in its power to use preferred names and pronouns. The option to use a preferred name should be publicized so that patrons know that they can do so; as with the introduction scenario described above, it is important that people not feel singled out. An example of how to do this is an automatic email to all new patrons when the accounts are created; this can include information on accessing the library account online as well as instructions for adding a preferred name. Signage at the desk and on the library homepage is another way to publicize the preferred name option without forcing people to out themselves by talking to library staff in person.

Though it may feel awkward for some people at first, normalization of trans* identities through language in every context is an important way of supporting this community. It eliminates many of the daily stresses that come from being referred to by the wrong pronouns or feeling out of place due to terminology. Any awkwardness felt by library staff as they adjust is far less harmful than the potential discomfort or even shame felt by trans* people whose identities are questioned every day by the constant use of gendered language. If they feel unwelcome or uncomfortable, trans* people may simply avoid using the library. Adjusting the language used by library staff is an easy (and free) way to make a space feel safer for trans* people. Though it may take effort on the part of the staff to change their thinking and subsequently their habitual language, commitment and practice (on both personal and institutional levels) make it possible.

Restrooms

The 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey found that “[m]ore than half (59%) of respondents avoided using a public restroom in the past year because they were afraid of confrontations or other problems they might experience” (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2016, p. 15). Acknowledging and working to solve this problem is a critical way that libraries can make their physical spaces welcoming to everyone. If at all possible, gender-neutral restrooms should be provided. Signage should be prominent and not exclusive (labels such as ‘family restroom’ can imply that individuals should not use the space). The following text is from an [all-gender bathroom sign](#) designed by Keshet.

WHY IS THIS BATHROOM ALL-GENDER? Because it’s important that all members of our community feel safe and included. For many transgender people and people who don’t conform to societal gender norms, using a public restroom is a daily struggle. Trans and gender expansive people are often harassed, physically assaulted, or questioned by authorities in both men’s and women’s bathrooms if they are assumed to be in the wrong bathroom. All-gender restrooms provide access to safe bathrooms and changing areas for people of any gender identity and presentation. They also provide safe spaces for those who need the assistance of a personal care attendant or those with small children.

(Keshet, 2013)

This language explicitly declares support for trans* people and articulates why an all-gender restroom is important. In addition to providing a safe place for trans* people to go, it publicly demonstrates that the institution wants them to feel comfortable.

It is not unusual for libraries to lack the funding to build gender-neutral restrooms if none already exist. While they should definitely be part of any future construction (and fundraising for that specific purpose should be considered), there are still ways to support the trans* community.

Signage such as that put up by [Anglia Ruskin University](#) (Gerdes, 2017) reminds people not to question, stare at, or otherwise bother anyone for their restroom choices (and also explicitly affirms to trans* people that they have the right to be there). Offering other options also helps: lists and maps of gender-neutral restrooms on campus, such as the one created by the [LGBTQ Center at UNC Chapel Hill](#) (LGBTQ Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, n.d.), provide those uncomfortable with gendered restrooms with somewhere else to go.

Whatever restrooms are available, the choice of which to use should always be left up to the individual; having a gender-neutral restroom does not mean that anyone should use it if they prefer one of the others. It is a good idea to have official written policy affirming this; the policy should be posted both on the library website and outside the doors of each restroom. It not only lets trans* patrons know that the library wants them to feel comfortable but also reminds all community members that they should not question anyone about what restroom they use. The webpage “[FAQ: Answers to Some Common Questions About Equal Access to Public Restrooms](#)” (Lambda Legal, n.d.) is a good one to use as a link on the library website or to educate staff; it answers questions and dispels myths about the issue.

Privacy

Some of the interactions that fall under access services can be stressful for trans* patrons. Even if the library systems and staff use their preferred names, people may hesitate to ask for the information they need in public, whether through not wanting to out themselves or for other reasons. Providing clear options for increased privacy can encourage them to use the library’s services. Self-checkout machines allow anyone who wants to avoid handing materials directly to a librarian. Even if the reference desk is in a public area, patrons should have the option to

conduct a reference interview in a more private location (without feeling singled out for needing to do so). Online chat is another way for reference questions to be answered in a safely anonymous environment (as long as no login is required to use it); the option and anonymity of chat can be advertised through signage and on the library website.

Conclusion

This article describes some concrete ways that library staff can support their trans* patrons. The emphasis has been on intentionally creating a welcoming environment through language and atmosphere, which can be done by any library regardless of funding and other logistics. Some resources with further information are mentioned here, but they are by no means the only ones. When looking for more information on ways to support trans* people, whether it be for services or for collection development, remember to check the authority. Ensure that the information was created by (or at least in consultation with) trans* people. Well-meaning but uninformed “allies” may not be aware of the real needs of this community. In addition, listen to the people that you are trying to support. The suggestions described here are general; input from local trans* patrons will help the library meet their specific needs.

Keeping current is another important element in supporting trans* patrons. Legislation and preferred language vary by location and change over time, so make sure that you are aware of the particulars of your place and community. Preferred language also varies from person to person (for example, some people self-identify as ‘queer,’ while others consider the word offensive), so it is better to ask instead of assuming that one person’s terminology applies to others.

Most importantly, when making lasting changes that positively support any marginalized group, it is not enough to hold one workshop and then drop the subject. Ongoing dialogue and advocacy are necessary. Whether through long-term fundraising efforts for gender-neutral restrooms, regular staff trainings in neutral and preferred language, or repeated conversations with the LGBTQ+ Center on the needs of trans* students, supporting trans* patrons must be a permanent part of the library's future if they are to feel truly welcome.

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