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Diversity Dispatch: Welcoming and Supporting Transgender Patrons

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DIVERSITY
DISPATCH

Welcoming and Supporting Transgender Patrons

BY ERIN GOW

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Increasing public discussion of the rights of transgender individuals places the spotlight on this frequently misunderstood community and many individuals face increasing marginalization, discrimination, and open hostility in their daily lives. Libraries of all types can provide a welcome refuge and safe space in which trans people can access vital information and resources. In July 2017 I was lucky enough to attend the American Association of Law Libraries Annual Meeting in Austin, Texas. Among many thought-provoking and informative programs was “Meeting the Legal Information Needs of Transgender Library Patrons,” which discussed recent research along with legal, service, and cataloging issues related to trans patrons. Many of the ideas presented in this program were widely applicable to all libraries and highlighted the difficulties faced by trans individuals, whose gender identity does not correspond with their culturally or legally assigned gender at birth.

The session opened with a presentation by Lou Weaver, a representative from Equality Texas www.equalitytexas.org who introduced basic concepts and terminology related to the trans community. He illustrated concepts using visuals such as the Genderbread Person www.genderbread.org and highlighted useful terminology and basic guidance about how to use language that is welcoming to trans individuals. He pointed out that something as simple as asking what name or pronouns a person uses can show support, by reinforcing the concept that names and gender are an inherent part of an individual worthy of respect, and not something that society has the right to assign or that an individual simply “prefers.”

The second presenter, Spencer Keralis, is a professor at the University of North Texas who has been involved in the TX-Gender Project www.txgenderproject.org. This project developed resources for public services librarians across the state of Texas, extensively studied the difficulties transgender individuals face, and examined the role libraries and librarians can play in creating a welcoming atmosphere for the trans community. The statistics revealed through this study were striking, including the dispiriting fact that 41% of the patron respondents indicated that they had endured a negative gender-related experience in a library. I could not help speculating that these negative experiences may reinforce the fear reported by 59% of the respondents in the same survey who indicated that they worry about being outed if they seek LGBTQ information at a library. Although we

may think of ourselves as entirely non-discriminatory in our role as librarians and perceive libraries as safe spaces, it is understandable that trans individuals often perceive the library environment differently, and may struggle to trust a stranger working on the other side of the library desk.

The final presenter, David Melanson, drew on his expertise as head of continuing resources at the University of Texas Libraries to discuss the complications of classifying materials that deal with trans issues, or are authored by a transgender individual. For works by trans authors, additional genders or other information may need to be added to the name authority. The speed at which the preferred terminology is changing within the trans community also means that standardized classification systems, like LCSH or MeSH, often use at least some outdated terms. Patron and staff confusion about terminology and meanings can complicate matters further, but Melanson concluded with some suggestions for best practice, including a reminder that library staff need to be familiar with both the formal terms allowed in a particular classification system and with preferred terms in current use in the trans community. An understanding of the alternative terms means that librarians can use terms intentionally and sensitively in both the catalog and public service environments.

Librarians are in an ideal position to help support local trans communities and individuals, and it is worthwhile for all of us to take the time to review best practice and local procedures to ensure that we are doing everything we can to be inclusive. There are many ways to make the library environment more welcoming, from something as simple as wearing a rainbow pin or adding pronouns to staff name tags to indicate to patrons that we are allies, to updating library forms to remove unnecessary declarations of gender. A very simple change that we can all make immediately is to address all library patrons using gender neutral terms by default. For those who wish to do more, but may not know where to start, reaching out to local groups already supporting the trans community can provide the opportunity to broaden services and ensure that the library becomes a true partner in the community. Creating an open library environment for everyone, without exclusion based on gender, is a vital step in helping to offset the detrimental effects of a public environment where trans individuals too often face discrimination.

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