

Developing Best Practices for Serving Transgender Patrons at Academic Library Service Points

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In May 2012, the Board of Associated Students of Western Washington University signed a resolution calling for gender neutral restrooms across the campus, and in Fall 2013, the University Registrar announced a Preferred Names Policy, under which transgender individuals could register a name that best reflected their personal identity. To address these opportunities, an academic library formed a taskforce which led to the eventual development of Best Practices on serving trans patrons in the Libraries. This paper will discuss the inception, implementation, and conclusions associated with this entire process, providing examples of how the resulting Best Practices were incorporated into daily library activities.



Introduction

In May 2012, the Board of Associated Students of Western Washington University signed a resolution calling for gender neutral restrooms across the campus, and in Fall 2013, the University Registrar announced a Preferred Names Policy, under which transgender individuals could register a name that best reflected their personal identity. Because of the University's longstanding commitment to diversity and inclusion,¹ alongside the library profession's commitment to creating library spaces for all people,² Western Libraries formed a taskforce to address these opportunities which led to the eventual development of Best Practices for serving trans patrons in the Libraries. This paper will discuss the inception, implementation, and some conclusions associated with this entire process, providing specific examples of how the Best Practices were incorporated into daily library activities.

Transgender Patrons & Libraries in the United States

In the auto-ethnographic article "The Tyranny of Gendered Spaces," author Petra Doan outlines her experience in transitioning from a man into a woman—and her subsequent experiences in public spaces. She particularly notes that because of their appearance and identity presentation may contradict heteronormative social customs, transgender individuals often experience harassment in public areas—venues that encompass public transit, elevators, classrooms, and restrooms.³ Doan especially notes that public restrooms are a hot button issue for trans individuals for many reasons. In some regions in the United States, there is no distinction between a male by birth and a transgender male. Thus, subsequent use of public female restrooms—or any gendered public space—by transgender men (and of male restrooms by transgender women) can be a legal gray area for security and

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building administration.⁴ Having no definitive answer on the legality of the situation further promotes confusion and reluctance to tackle the issues. Doan's entry echoes the statements a strong body of existing literature on the needs of the transgender community in the United States. Kath Brown's 2004 article discussed how a binary gender system adversely impacted trans individuals, particularly in public facilities,⁵ and Brown's article echoes Namaste's earlier 1996 examination.⁶

Doan, Brown or Namaste are not alone in their examination of gender, identity, and public spaces. Others have reported the challenges associated with being a trans individual in a world largely built upon the assumption of that gender is a binary cultural construct, such as Cheryl Chase's 1998 article on restrooms as a platform for activism.⁷ Nancy Duncan's 1996 article on negotiating public and private spaces for trans individuals covered a wide range of challenges⁸ while Darryl Hill explores and comments upon the contemporary transphobia phenomenon.⁹

In conducting a literature review for a discussion of transgender individuals in library settings, most of the scholarly literature is—no surprise here—related to the information needs of transgender individuals. In an early article published in 2002, author Jami Taylor wrote about both informational needs, and the arguably more “practical” needs of transgender individuals in library settings, namely the need for safe public spaces to be and function within.¹⁰ In the same year, author Lukenbill reviews the presence of LGBTQI archives and library collections in the United States, with commentary on the cultural significance and importance of any group maintaining focused collections that chronicle their own history.¹¹ Another early article details a thorough community needs assessment for transgender patrons in a public library setting in Portland, OR. Organized into six sections (one of which was entitled “Community Relationships;” yet another “Demographic Information”), authors Angie Beiriger and Rose Jackson discovered that the trans community was not a homogeneous, one-service-suits-all community but instead were a group of diverse individuals with diverse information

needs.¹² Also in 2007, Hillias Martin and James Murdock published *Serving Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender & Questioning Teens: A How-To-Do-It Manual for Librarians*—an indicator of the growing awareness around the needs for this population.¹³ Schaller's 2011 article, “Information Needs of LGBTQ College Students,” provides an overview of these same needs in an academic library environment.¹⁴ And Fiona Jardine, in her article “Inclusive Information for Trans* Persons,” provides an overview of the informational behaviors of, and the potential access barriers within libraries for, trans patrons.¹⁵

Many of these articles and texts in LIS scholarly literature focused on the informational needs of, or upon the importance collection development as a means of representation for, transgender people in public or school library settings. However, few articles have commented on the process for developing best practices at university and collegiate libraries. Of those few, authors Mehra and Braquet make an excellent argument for why academic libraries are uniquely positioned to create inclusive spaces. Instead of holding to limiting historical perceptions of being simple storehouses of knowledge, Mehra & Braquet outline areas for academic libraries to pursue based upon their series of qualitative interviews with the LGBTQI community at the University of Tennessee Knoxville.¹⁶

Outside the LIS literature, author Kattner offers steps for creating trans-inclusive policies and procedures to protect transgender students in collegiate settings, recommending a series of training opportunities among personnel; policy development; and outreach to student groups.¹⁷ Zemsky and Sanlo also comment on the importance of policies for trans individuals within a higher education environment.¹⁸ And while Kattner's article does frame facility concerns, such as use of locker rooms and bathrooms for trans individuals, the author is not a library professional—and as such, does not comment on the information needs of patrons or personnel in libraries.

A note on socio-cultural context: It should be noted that this article details the experience of imple-

menting Best Practices for serving transgender patrons at Western Libraries, which is located within Western Washington University, a Masters comprehensive university in Northwest Washington State (within the United States). Thus, given the location and the intellectual heritage at Western Washington University (which largely stems from a European/Western tradition), this paper addresses recommendations for implementing these practices at an academic library in a North American socio-cultural context. Additional considerations inherent in this North American cultural and legal environment include lack of accurate statistics. Transgender identity is not a demographic easily tracked by government entities at national, state, regional, or university levels—which makes estimating the number of patrons affected by these issues difficult to determine; thus, data-driven decision-making about the provision of relevant services is even more challenging.¹⁹ In 2011, the Williams Institute estimated that there are 700,000 transgender individuals within the United States; however, there are no official statistics on how many of these individuals attend college.²⁰ Furthermore, transgender individuals face a host of obstacles in every arena of their public and private lives—from access to medical care to access to education and information.²¹ Thus, further research would be needed in order to examine this process in another socio-cultural and/or national environment.

Impetus for Best Practices at Western Libraries

Responding to Patrons Needs and the Development of the Best Practices Document

In May 2012, the Board of Directors of the Associated Students of Western Washington University passed a resolution regarding gender neutral restrooms. The motion called for the implementation of gender neutral restrooms across the campus in order to 1) remove barriers to basic human functions for transgender individuals; and 2) to create a more inclusive campus climate for this population.²² In the spirit of

promoting awareness about this issue, the resolution also provided a list of restrooms across campus that could easily be converted into gender neutral restrooms—two of which were located in Western Libraries. In addition to having student support, the on campus Equal Opportunity Office also supported this endeavor. Seeing this as an opportunity to be responsive to user needs, the Western Libraries Diversity Committee secured support and permission from Library Administration. Then, after permission was granted, new signage was made to appropriately, and respectfully, reflect the new functionality of the facility; educate personnel about the need for these restrooms; and communicate the newly transformed facility to campus stakeholders.

This single event, and the subsequent activities associated with it, relied upon the time and expertise of several library professionals. Historically, departments within Western Libraries had echoed a pattern: The creation of a pragmatic response to single, infrequent opportunities that presented themselves through third party organizations (such as new campus regulations). But instead of responding to user needs as they present themselves—a reactive approach—why not develop a plan to actively anticipate patron population needs at multiple service points? Thus the rationale for developing a best practices document was born. Stemmed from a desire for both efficient *and* holistic inclusion for the trans community on campus, it seemed more reasonable to devote the necessary human resources—time, creativity, and labor—to develop a proactive pursuit of inclusion-related goals for this demographic. But how to do that?

The subsequent development of the Best Practices document grew from three distinct influences. First, a literature review; then reliance upon existing expertise on Western Washington University's campus; and lastly, an understanding of the information needs of the library personnel. The first strategy provided an environmental scan of professional resources on the topic of inclusionary library practices for transgender patrons, with a focus on aca-

demographic libraries. The second strategy was to capitalize on already existing resources in the Libraries and expertise on campus, such as colleagues within the Equal Opportunity Office and within Western's Associated Students Queer Resource Center, a student outreach program. And lastly, knowledge of my colleagues' information needs about best practices for this patron population came from many conversations in both informal (i.e., anecdotal) and formal (i.e., workshops) settings. For example, one of the most common questions encountered was, "How do these proposed practices affect Technical and Acquisition Services?" From technical services to the credit instruction to workshop scenarios, colleagues had questions that were specifically informed by the service point in which they operated.

Opening with the literature review, the resulting Best Practices document continued on to offer strategies and additional resources for the departments under three umbrellas: Collections, Acquisitions, Facilities & Technical Services; Public Service Points throughout the WWU Libraries; and Teaching & Learning Partners. A brief aside: The last category, Teaching & Learning Partners, is a reflection of the current configuration of library instruction efforts within the Western Libraries Learning Commons. The Learning Commons hosts a unique blend of credit and informal/workshop instruction endeavors, and thus all strategies within the Best Practices document were tailored to meet the needs of each type of instructor. The intended audience for the document was the Western Libraries personnel, and the intended purpose of this document was to serve as a reference for either immediate actions or to prompt further questions. The document was then shared with, and vetted by, the Western Libraries Dean's Leadership Group—an managerial team that served as review board of sorts with final questions and recommendations. Upon successful review, and with subsequent organizational backing, the revised Best Practices document was then adopted for implementation and shared with the Libraries during an organization-wide general meeting.

Case Studies of the Best Practices in Action

This next section is devoted to showcasing three tools from the Best Practices document. Presented in the spirit of miniature case studies, these brief reports a) detail the tool or strategy in question and b) some of the considerations necessary in implementing these strategies.

Case Study One. Service Point & Corresponding Tool: Library Instruction—Inclusion Statement

What: One of the tools available through the Best Practices document is the inclusion statement for credit course syllabi. The inclusion clause is a paragraph-long statement which explains the instructor's desire for an inclusive classroom experience, and within this statement, contains an explicit reference to respecting gender identity and expression. Any instructor can insert this statement into their course syllabus (or alternatively, into their workshop/bibliographic instruction description). Furthermore, instructors can use the statement as a conversation starter about expected behavior and conduct of all classroom participants.

Intended Audience & Outreach Strategies: The intended audience for this Best Practices tool are instructors within Western Libraries and the Learning Commons, who are then welcome to use the clause as a conversation starter for their instruction spaces. The statement was shared through the Best Practices document and again through e-mail with several library faculty and instructors.

Intended Impact: The intended impact of this inclusion clause is to promote a conversation about respectful dialogue to all students, across multiple demographics and identities. By explicitly referencing gender identity and expression, it is the hope that students will receive an overt signal designed to raise awareness.

Assessment: Assessing the impact of this inclusion clause is difficult because the clause has only been available since Fall 2014 Quarter. Four library

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faculty have adopted the clause in their credit-bearing courses but have not reported any anecdotal evidence on impact of this clause. Future goals for this tool may include a brown bag/workshop on how to effectively use this inclusion statement as a conversation starter among classroom participants.

Case Study Two. Service Point & Corresponding Tool: Circulation—Preferred Names Policy

What: Another tool available through the Best Practices document is information about, and suggested practices for, the Preferred Names Policy at Western Washington University. Briefly, the Preferred Names Policy originated from the University Registrar's Office and allows students, staff, and faculty to identify by a preferred name rather than by a legal one.²³ While this policy is available to everyone affiliated with Western, the trans community is undoubtedly served by this opportunity. However, this policy had ramifications for the Circulation Department at Western Libraries. One such question arose about how to perform circulation tasks on behalf of a patron who identifies by one name while the Libraries only has a record for another.

Intended Audience & Outreach Strategies: The intended audience for these recommendations are specifically the Western Libraries Circulation Services department. These personnel, in completing tasks such as checking out items and receiving funds for library fines, have the greatest access to a patron's account and thus, had the greatest need for strategies to resolve identity-based ambiguities. Aside from sharing this information with the entire Libraries and Learning Commons, the Diversity & Disability Services Librarian reached out to the Circulation Department Head to host an informal training. During this time, personnel were encouraged to ask frank questions and discuss the potential impact of this new policy upon the daily activities within the Department.

Intended Impact: The intended impact of this tool is to streamline circulation experiences for all Western Libraries patrons who have elected to use a

preferred name in place of a legal name, and to reduce frustration and/or ambiguity for both the patrons and the Circulation personnel.

Assessment: It is difficult to assess the impact of this policy upon patrons because library personnel do not add details about patron characteristics into the records of their service statistics—and rightfully so, in order to protect patron privacy. However, the Diversity & Disability Services Librarian received some anecdotal evidence from one colleague that the training and the suggested language was useful in daily activities because the information reduced ambiguity about what to do. Future goals for this tool may include a check-in or survey of some sort in order to determine any additional informational needs within the Circulation Department.

Case Study Three. Service Point & Corresponding Tool: Library Facilities—Gender Neutral Restrooms

What: Yet another tool implemented from the Best Practices document are the gender neutral restrooms at Western Libraries. In addition to working with Libraries Administration and campus facilities management to convert already existing unisex restrooms within the Libraries into gender neutral ones, the Diversity & Disability Services Librarian coordinated the development of appropriate signage; determined strategic locations for relevant signage about the restrooms; and lastly, created an electronic guide as a quick reference resource (i.e., where are these restrooms?) for Libraries personnel who operate in public service points (and thus, may need to direct patrons to the restrooms and/or answer related questions). A note about the electronic guide: Building cultural competency around these issues enhances awareness and promotes inclusion of diverse groups,²⁴ and in order to achieve that end, the Diversity Committee created an informative Library Guide. This guide provided a primer on common terms (drawn from Stryker, Currah, and Moore's introductory article²⁵), campus and regional resources, and a brief bibliography of transgender issues in the United States. Some months

later, the Diversity Committee invited the Center for Gender Sanity, a regional nonprofit organization that specialized in educating communities on transgender issues, to present several workshops to both the Libraries personnel.

Intended Audience & Outreach Strategies: The intended audience for these restrooms and strategic signage are all patrons who would benefit from having access to a gender neutral restroom. And of course, the intended audience for the electronic informational guide are the Libraries personnel. Upon the transition of the unisex restrooms into gender neutral restrooms, and the subsequent creation of informational resources, the Diversity & Disability Services Librarian shared all the information with all library personnel. Furthermore, she notified the Associated Students Queer Resource Center, a student organization with constituents that could be impacted by this opportunity, about the change.

Intended Impact: The intended impact of this tool was to create two safe and private spaces that any member of the transgender community could access.

Assessment: Again, it is difficult to assess the impact of these facilities upon patrons because library personnel do not add details about patron characteristics into the records of their service statistics—and rightfully so, in order to protect patron privacy. However, the Diversity & Disability Services Librarian received some anecdotal evidence in the form of an e-mail from a student patron, who expressed great appreciation for the restrooms. Future goals may include examining the frequency of inquiries about the restrooms within service statistics.

Conclusions

The profiles of practices in action, given above, are merely three examples of the Best Practices document incorporated into (some of) the daily activities at Western Washington University Libraries. Future goals for the Best Practices document include continued updates from the scholarly literature and the pursuit of additional practices—such as changing gendered language on library signage, forms, and in

any original cataloging completed within the Libraries. Furthermore, future efforts on behalf of this patron population should center on increased outreach and partnership to relevant campus groups to ensure maximum impact and use of these tools.

Any librarian or library professional interested in employing these practices and/or developing their own document should naturally start with the fundamental question of, “Should our academic library do this?” The answer depends, of course, upon several factors that are unique to the institutional context of an academic library—such as administrative support; prior diversity and inclusion work completed on this topic; patron needs (demonstrated or anecdotal); collegial engagement and support; existing campus or regional expertise on this topic (i.e., potential partners); general awareness of trans issues; and more. Additionally, the decision to pursue a project such as this will require commitment to continued learning, labor, creativity, and more time than likely anticipated. It is too naïve to simply urge all libraries to adopt some variation of the Best Practices document outlined throughout this paper, as that request doesn’t recognize the complexities inherent in instituting organizational practices nor does it respect institutional context. What is important is to remember that libraries are spaces for *all* people,²⁶ and should strive towards that goal by actively implementing inclusive practices, regardless of what the specifics are.

Notes

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