

Policies on Selecting Materials on Controversial Topics

Selection & Reconsideration Policy Toolkit for Public, School, & Academic Libraries

It is the responsibility of all libraries to serve every member of their designated communities. It is not the responsibility of a library to promote one point of view over another. This requires that libraries collect material that represents majority beliefs as well as minority beliefs. The American Library Association's Library Bill of Rights and the Freedom to Read Statement provide ethical guidance to librarians on these issues. In providing access to a diversity of materials, some material may be offensive and/or controversial to some patrons. Libraries cannot reject and remove a resource because an individual or a group has found the material objectionable. Libraries must provide access to material that may be controversial to some patrons, while also providing a process by which individuals or groups may formally request reconsideration of material they find offensive or inaccurate.

Selecting Materials on Controversial Topics in Public Libraries

Materials that cover controversial topics are included in a collection when they meet the selection criteria set forward by the library. Selecting materials is a key function that libraries use to fulfill their mission in the community. By representing multiple points of view within the collection, libraries will inevitably contain materials that are offensive to some members of the community. Having a stated position on collecting materials about controversial topics will allow the selection policy to guide the process. It will also serve as an opportunity to explain to the community the ways in which collecting materials on controversial topics advance the mission of the library.

Example: Public Library Selection of Materials on Controversial Topics

A balanced collection attempts to represent all sides of controversial issues as far as availability of materials, space, and budget allow. Selection is based upon criteria stated in this policy. The race, religion, nationality, or political views of an author or creator; offensive language; depictions or descriptions of violence or sexually explicit activity; controversial content of an item; or endorsement or disapproval by an individual or group in the community does not cause an item automatically to be included or excluded from the library's collection.

All public libraries contain materials that some patrons may find objectionable. Libraries may omit from the collection materials that some patrons feel are important. In either case, the library has procedures that patrons may use in requesting the reconsideration of materials.

Selecting Materials on Controversial Topics in School Libraries

The majority of users served in school libraries are minors, and American society is often very protective of its youth. These two facts create challenges for school librarians selecting materials on a range of perspectives on topics which may be considered controversial by some in the school community. Hot button topics that may be deemed controversial and offensive to some range from LGBTQ-themed resources to politics, race relations, and sexually explicit language. Court decisions including *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District* (1969) *Board of Education*, *Island Trees Union Free School District v. Pico* (1982) established that minors do have First Amendment rights in schools including the right to receive information. Ethically, school librarians find guidance for selecting resources which may be

considered controversial in the American Library Association's Library Bill of Rights, the American Library Association's Code of Ethics, and the Freedom to Read Statement. Therefore, school librarians are ethically responsible to provide access to resources with varying perspectives for students' curricular and personal information needs.

Example: School Library Selection of Materials on Controversial Topics

The school board subscribes to the principles expressed in the American Library Association's Library Bill of Rights. It is the responsibility of the school district to provide a wide range of materials on different levels of difficulty and representing different points of view. School library professional staff will provide materials on opposing viewpoints on controversial issues to enable students to develop necessary critical thinking skills to be discriminate users of information and productive members of society.

Selecting Materials on Controversial Topics in Academic Libraries

Academic institutions have a historical and ethical obligation to support intellectual freedom and encourage debate. This commitment to diverse points of view is supported by the Association of University Professors and the American Library Association. Colleges and universities may also draft their own statements and definitions of intellectual freedom and freedom of campus speech. These local documents may provide guidance for libraries searching for language to support the collection of controversial materials.

Example: Academic Library Selection of Materials on Controversial Topics

The university library supports the free exchange of ideas with collections that provide access to a selection of material on all subjects that support the university's mission. The library provides access in accordance with the American Library Association's Library Bill of Rights, the Freedom to Read Statement, and the Freedom to View Statement. The university library strives to balance access to, and ownership of, information resources that offer the widest possible range of viewpoints. Material will not be excluded because of frankness of language or controversial approach or because the political, moral or religious, sexual, social, economic, or scientific views expressed or because of the race or national origin, politics, or religion of the author.

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Why Do I Need a Policy? (why) | Politics and Timing of Policy Creation (timing) | Selection Policies for Non-Public Institutions (nonpublic)

Basic Components of a Selection Policy

Library Mission (mission) | Support for Intellectual Freedom (intellectualfreedom) | Objectives (objectives) | Responsibility for Selection (responsibility) | Selection Criteria (criteria) | Acquisitions Procedures (acquisitions) | Special Collections (special) | **Selecting Controversial Materials** | Gifts and Donations (donations) | Collection Maintenance and Weeding (weeding) | Policy Revision (revision) | Reconsideration (reconsideration)

Reconsideration Procedure

Guiding Principles (principles) | Statement of Policy (statement) | Informal Complaints (informalcomplaints) | Request for Formal Reconsideration (formalreconsideration) | Sample Reconsideration Form (sampleforms) | Sample Letter to Complainant (complainant) | Reconsideration Committees (committees)

Appendix

Intellectual Freedom Core Documents (coredocuments) | Challenge Support and Reporting Censorship (reportingcensorship) | Bibliography of Additional Selection and Reconsideration Policy Resources (bibliography)

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