

Queer Information: Addressing the Needs of Academic Library Staff and Students in LGBTQ+ Information Behavior

1. Introduction

Efforts to meet the information needs of minority populations in academic libraries often prove lacking. Students who identify as part of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) community can find themselves at a loss when they seek information in places they feel are not equipped to serve them. LGBTQ+ students have specific, “unique research needs from those of the dominant culture, but also unique needs from other minority groups, warranting specific focus” (Hays 114). From fears of discrimination and judgement to anemic collections and outdated categorization, LGBTQ+ patrons face particular barriers to library resources. According to estimates, 10% of any given student body identifies as LGBTQ+, which means that “approximately one academic library patron out of every ten may feel isolated or judged within the library for their...identities” (Kitzie and Crouse 1). At the same time, academic library staff may also struggle despite the best of intentions to serve all users equally. The librarians who seek to help these students have their own information needs that must be met in order for them to communicate and relate to their patrons. This paper examines several studies that make use of user-centered approaches to highlight the importance of understanding the needs of both LGBTQ+ patrons of academic libraries and the library staff who serve them. The research cuts across a range of areas, such as outreach, collection development, and reference interactions to show how the proper approach can make all the difference for academic librarians seeking to provide the best environment for the information behaviors of the underserved LGBTQ+ community.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Players Involved

LGBTQ+ students have a range of particular privacy needs that affects how they use information resources such as the library, where they “might be studying queer history and theory...but could also be trying to fill a gap in knowledge about basic sexuality practices absent from sexual education classes in primary school, or seeking basic facts about how transgender individuals come out or transition” (Hays 114). They often find their information behavior stymied by a range of societal factors, such as the dominant heteronormative culture of the United States. This can leave students looking for LGBTQ+ sources feeling too ashamed or too shy to ask for help due to society’s insistence “that nonheterosexual desires and non-binary gender representations are irregularities” (114). Research shows that these library users often face unhelpful or upsetting interactions with staff, from negative body language to blatant discrimination and offensive language (Kitzie and Crouse 2). Other information barriers include the digital divide; thin, outdated collections; and negative personal attitudes toward LGBTQ+ materials (Pavenick and Martinez 111). Like many students, LGBTQ+ patrons may decline to use reference services because they do not see a need for help (Siegel et al. 124). At the same time, fear of facing judgement or discrimination from library staff often makes LGBTQ+ students hesitant to seek out help, while actual negative experiences can lead them to shun the library altogether in the future (Kitzie and Crouse 1). Of course, students are not the only actor with information needs in a library.

Academic librarians sit on the other side of this informational transaction. Professionals have an “ethical and professional duty to provide information to all patrons without overt judgment” (Siegel et al. 122), and research shows that engagement from librarians can significantly help or hinder the availability of resources (Kitzie and Crouse 2). No matter how

well-intentioned, however, librarians are often unwilling or unable to help LGBTQ+ patrons due to a lack of knowledge, and even when attempting to offer services, “body language, and other subtle cues may still unearth their implicit bias towards LGBTQIA+ patrons, creating a negative experience” (1). There seems to be a disconnect between the perceptions of library staff and students; librarians are often confident they can adequately assist LGBTQ+ patrons (Siegel et al. 126), but factors such as fear of negative repercussions arising from visibility can hinder service. Librarians are often particularly uncomfortable with inquiries regarding “safe sex practices, reflecting that their personal values impacted their service to LGBTQIA+ patrons more than a lack of understanding of LGBTQIA+ communities and resources” (Kitzie and Crouse 2). Staff-administration relationships can also influence decisions such as collection building and undermine “ability or belief that they would receive support for LGBTQIA+ content in the collection” (Pavenick and Martinez 111). In addition to the librarians themselves, any study of the interaction of patrons and staff needs to explore the information center itself.

2.2 Where Service Takes Place

Like much of society, libraries have evolved over the years to meet the LGBTQ+ community’s needs (Pavenick and Martinez 111). In addition to the academic library, many institutes of higher learning also have LGBTQ+ Student Centers that exist in an “attempt to bridge a gap on campuses for underrepresented groups and [have] included (and continue to include) a range of activities like advising, mentoring, personal and social development, and academic support” (Hays 112). Wherever they are housed, LGBTQ+ resources and materials are still often viewed negatively by librarians and users alike, which can give rise to access barriers along with a number of other factors, such as homophobic attitudes and behaviors, legislation, physical distance from a library, and anxiety about someone outing themselves (Siegel et al.

123). Academic libraries have the potential to be vital information resources for the LGBTQ+ community by “playing a positive role in providing information on sexuality, gender identity, and coming out for young people” (122). However, this role can be hindered when LGBTQ+ patrons are too reluctant to get assistance because they fear discrimination or judgement from library staff. Intentional or not, library staff may exhibit bias through nonverbal behaviors such as being hesitant to speak with or maintaining physical distance from someone identified as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. When an information request “is of a sexual nature, no matter the sexual orientation or gender identity of the patron, fear of judgment can often outweigh the patron’s desire for assistance” (122). In addition to actual and perceived issues at the library, LGBTQ+ patrons also often have to deal with issues in the system itself.

When they do seek assistance, LGBTQ+ students often face systemic information barriers. These roadblocks can include inaccurate or inappropriate cataloging and classification terminology, with information “marginalized on the shelves, cataloged as miscellaneous topics, and shelved in various locations....[which] are challenging to find for LGBTQIA+ patrons and may be potentially unhelpful and outdated if found” (Kitzie and Crouse 2). Surface-level, performative inclusion can also present an issue where “academic libraries may showcase gender-neutral bathrooms but fail to address deeper issues like resource provision and respectful interactions with transgender and gender non-conforming patrons” (7). Subject headings and other controlled vocabularies that libraries use often have outdated, even offensive, terminology. In addition to upsetting and offending patrons, this can make resources difficult to locate since the language the students use to discuss these topics is not the same used by the library to classify them. Students face other barriers as well, such as a general lack of resources while those that are available are often outdated. Academic libraries need to regularly update and maintain

their LGBTQ+ collection like any other in “an ongoing process requiring consistent evaluation to ensure materials remain current and aligned with evolving identities and topics within LGBTQIA+ communities” (2). One library noted that outside of MARC metadata, the only thing that marked materials as part of the LGBTQ+ collection was “an item as part of the collection is an approved bookplate on the inside front cover of the book or DVD case,” which implies that the problem might lie in the fact that “there was nothing to make the collection’s items stand out and there was no effective call for patron attention to them” (Pavenick and Martinez 110).

Determining the best solutions to such problems is where user-centered research comes in.

2.3 User-Centered Research

Researchers have used a number of user-centered approaches in studying the needs of LGBTQ+ students and the academic librarians who serve them. Surveys have proven to be a common tool. For example, Hays used an anonymous, custom survey along with an analysis of the library’s and LGBTQ+ student center’s holdings. The questionnaire asked students about their use of and comfort level with both spaces, starting with demographic information followed by a series of closed- and open-ended questions exploring how students used the LGBTQ+ center versus the academic library for LGBTQ+ information, such as how often they used existing services, their awareness of resources, reasons for seeking out materials, and overall comfort level at each location as a safe space. Any responses that self-identified as straight or cisgendered were deleted. Faculty in the Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies program distributed a link for students to take the survey while paper copies were distributed by the LGBTQ+ student center’s director (118). Participants could not be selected from the library because LGBTQ+ students cannot be identified by sight, the school does not collect

demographic information related to gender identity or sexuality, and librarians are not allowed to ask for such information (119).

Siegel et al. also used a survey in their research designed “to provide a more holistic understanding of LGBTQ information needs by gauging librarian perspectives toward these inquiries, as well as the factors that might influence their levels of comfort and confidence in answering such requests” (123). The researchers used Survey Monkey to distribute a custom, online questionnaire of 20 questions to participants recruited via professional electronic discussion lists (124). Of the 376 responses received, 29% identified as LGBTQ+ (126). The survey used Likert scales to obtain quantitative data and open-ended questions for qualitative data. Questions asked about familiarity and comfort levels with a range of subjects, including LGBTQ+ vocabulary, meeting LGBTQ+ students’ information needs, same-sex parenting, gender transitioning, and collection development (125-126). Survey participants were also asked about their need for training (126).

Kitzie and Crouse started with a questionnaire to find LGBTQ+ students who used the academic library for research. Participants were recruited via e-mail listservs and flyers hung in the library and screened to make sure they met recruitment criteria. From there, researchers selected ten participants, each of whom chose a pseudonym and self-identified in terms of sexuality and gender identity. Semi-structured interviews averaging about 30 minutes apiece were conducted with each via Zoom using a “combination of open questioning and the critical incident technique to identify memorable moments” (3). The interviews covered topics such as typical visits to the library, contributing factors to staff approachability, addressing positive and negative library experiences, the intersection of LGBTQ+ identities and library use, and how academic libraries could serve LGBTQ+ students better. Transcripts of each interview were

coded and analyzed in multiple rounds sentence by sentence, which resulted in a total of 57 codes in about a dozen categories (3).

Not all the research came from surveys and interviews. In a different approach, Pavenick and Martinez outline efforts to expand an academic library's LGBTQ+ materials with a biannual grant the library receives for that purpose (109). While their outreach activities are not typical research methodology, the study does analyze a user-centered approach to expanding the LGBTQ+ collection. The low-stakes outreach strategies sought input from faculty and students, which resulted in not only more items but also higher awareness and engagement (110). In the first step, librarians sent emails to their liaison faculty in subject areas such as literature and social and physical sciences for further recommendations about LGBTQ+ subjects and/or written by LGBTQ+ authors. Some faculty invited students to provide their input, and reaching out to LGBTQ+ student organizations offered a way to seek input from the greater student body. The university residence halls had recently added a LGBTQ+-themed house, which presented an opportunity "for the library to show support while also creating more awareness about the collection" (111). The researchers organized a pop-up library in the house with items from the LGBTQ+ collection. Despite the pop-up's casual nature, it proved the most labor intensive of the outreach strategies, requiring learning new software and setting up and manning the event. A Committee on LGBTIQ+ Campus Climate also allowed them to reach both faculty and students, as did campuswide events such as Club Week, Week of Welcome, and Tech Day, which provided opportunities to engage people in discussion and for "LGBTQIA+ topics to be situated in a layered space of campus experience," which allowed them to show visible "support for LGBTQIA+ people in relation to their interests as campus community members" (112).

2.4 Results of the Research

The research reinforces the idea that libraries are seen as a neutral, safe space. Patrons tend to be concerned with their own business rather than whether or not anyone else is LGBTQ+ or not. This neutral view seems dependent upon users working independently; the more patrons work with librarians to find LGBTQ+ materials, the more that view declines. While users may extend that neutrality to librarians, research suggests that applies mostly “to ready-reference questions instead of more in-depth research questions or questions dealing with LGBTQIA+ topics” (Kitzie and Crouse 4). However, neutrality may not always be a positive, as it can stem from a lack of visible support for LGBTQ+ students. Library professionals can see this as part of intellectual freedom and equity, but it can also make students less comfortable and more anxious about approaching staff for LGBTQ+ research questions (4). Hays notes that students reported feeling more comfortable with LGBTQ+ student center as a safe space than the library, although students generally spend their time there for social and entertainment purposes rather than academic. In fact, many reported having no awareness of the center’s academic resources (121). On the other hand, the academic library’s LGBTQ+ collection “intentionally aligns with coursework taught in the college’s WGSS courses and – budget permitting – additional books, journals, and films that support student research interests connected to those classes” (122). While there was some awareness of the library’s LGBTQ+ collection, few reported ever making use of it for either personal or academic reasons or even knew where they were located in the library (123). It does not help that controlled vocabularies can use outdated and/or offensive terminology, which raises another barrier to patrons seeking LGBTQ+ resources. LGBTQ+ students face information barriers due to scarce and outdated LGBTQ+ materials, and those that do exist “are frequently marginalized, miscategorized, or shelved under inappropriate headings,” and making appropriate, contemporary resources difficult to find can be interpreted as “a lack of

care for LGBTQIA+ students and their experiences” (Kitzie and Crouse 5). Regardless of how extensive a collection may be, LGBTQ+ patrons often are not aware of what materials libraries have and instead rely on community knowledge sharing, such as digital platforms and peer networks, which “not only fills an access gap but also reflects a deep trust in lived experience” (5). Reference librarians can help to fill this knowledge gap and aid students in building information literacy and research skills (5). Of course, steps need to be taken in order to be able to reach LGBTQ+ students in the first place.

Research suggests that libraries can better serve their LGBTQ+ patrons by actively “affirming peer spaces, both online and in person, offer safety, shared understanding, and immediacy, which are qualities that may be (or are perceived to be) lacking in academic settings” (Kitzie and Crouse 6). Proactive assistance and positive body language make patrons feel more comfortable in approaching library staff, and “caring behaviors, such as follow-ups and tailored guidance, are essential components of quality reference service that promote inclusion and trust” (6). Other steps that can help include hosting LGBTQ+ events outside of Pride Month, which is in June, having LGBTQ+ student groups meet in the library, and making use of prominent shelving and displays that “provide a holistic vantage point of LGBTQIA+ identities and issues rather than consolidating them into a monolithic narrative” and avoid “only focusing on queer trauma at the expense of queer joy” (8). Dedicated LGBTQ+ collections serve as outreach as well as enhancing representation and inclusivity (2). At the same time, while research materials are understandably a major aspect of an academic library, LGBTQ+ students report a greater interest in more personal resources, such as fiction and memoirs, indicating that they “yearn to access books, articles, and films that address their growth and personal development needs in addition to academic support” (Hays 124). User-centered approaches to collection development

allows the library to increase the number of materials that students wish to see, which in turn increases use of the collection. This also lets the library show that it is not just a neutral space, but one “for finding materials that illustrate personal experience, help with personal growth, and support topical and academic research in LGBTQIA+ studies” (Pavenick and Martinez 111). Showing support often starts with active outreach efforts from the library.

Outreach from an academic library to the LGBTQ+ student body seems to pay off in a number of ways. Pavenick and Martinez report that as a result of their outreach efforts, the LGBTQ+ collection saw an increase in the number of items from less than 1,000 to almost 2,000, including DVDs, eBooks, print books, streaming media, and new databases. Suggestions came from a number of departments, such as Anthropology; Classics; Comparative World Literature; Engineering; English Literature; Environmental Science; Romance Languages; Physics; and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. This gave the collection more depth and breadth (112). Usage also increased by 43% at the end of 2020, which amounted to more than half “of the total number of checkouts over the previous 20 years. These numbers are remarkable on their own, but even more so considering the stacks were closed for several months of 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic” (113). The use of a pop-up library strengthened ties with the residence halls (112), and the inner-campus calls have become a regular occurrence every couple of years, which has improved connections between faculty and librarians (111). These improvements come despite a lack of any other promotional efforts for the LGBTQ+ collection, not even a special section for the materials. Items in the collection are scattered throughout the stacks with only bookplates and notations in the MARC records (110). This all boils down to a need for “academic libraries to embrace critical librarianship principles, ensuring that their

spaces, resources, and interactions genuinely affirm and support LGBTQIA+ identities” (Kitzie and Crouse 7).

On the staff side, librarians recognize their need for training (Siegel et al. 129), but most are willing and even enthusiastic to help with LGBTQ+ inquiries even though the fact remains that a variety of “latent influences can reduce or otherwise affect actual comfort levels and competence to meet these needs” (138). Studies find that relatively few librarians show negative biases toward LGBTQ+ people, although some acknowledge the difficulty of working in “conservative environments” such as red states or religiously-affiliated institutions (134). More than 85% of librarians surveyed reported high levels of confidence in serving LGBTQ+ patrons’ information needs (126), but a number of factors can influence a librarian’s comfort level with addressing LGBTQ+ information needs. One is their innate duty of care/professional responsibility, particularly when the inquiry comes from or relates to a young person. Such queries are often highly personal and information a librarian directs them toward “could potentially have a profound effect on a vulnerable inquirer at a formative time in their life,” although professionals may worry about violating the wishes of a young person’s guardian (134). Another is public visibility, where a professional may be identifiable as “as the librarian who has carried out the work,” which can include challenges to a library’s collection, public backlash, censorship from administration, or the “more general fear of harming one’s reputation within the community and within the organization” (136). Personal prejudices can also influence a librarian’s comfort level, which Siegal et al. call the “shock factor,” especially when inquiries arise concerning sexual practices. This can be the root of discrimination LGBTQ+ patrons face and may manifest in the form of “overt moral judgments on the part of the librarian,...[or] more subtly expressed in unintended ways, leading to microaggressions against the inquirer” (137).

Ongoing training can benefit librarians and their patrons. For example, keeping up with modern terminology to better communicate with LGBTQ+ students helps interactions and the library experience. Research shows that established terms like bisexual, gay, lesbian, sexual orientation, and transgender are familiar to most librarians, while fewer have heard of more recent terminology like cisgender, gender binary, gender variant, and genderqueer (127). Kitzie and Crouse also point to a need for training in “cultural humility” to enable librarians with the tools to avoid unintentional discrimination by encouraging “awareness of current LGBTQIA+ issues and sociopolitical pressures” and making sure they can “not only provide resources but also respond with empathy and recognition of the stakes for patrons” (7).

3. Conclusion

Research highlights the importance of “supporting the needs and interests of LGBTQIA+ patrons of all ages, despite lack of funding and in defiance of foundation/community intolerance” (Pavenick and Martinez 110). To that end, libraries need to take proactive steps “towards cultural humility by seeking feedback from marginalized students and building and sustaining supportive and collaborative relationships” (Kitzie and Crouse 2). User-centered approaches help to create academic libraries that are not only welcoming, but inviting. Increased visibility, accessibility, and ongoing maintenance of LGBTQ+ collections let students know what is available and helps ensure that it is what they *want* from the library. Programming such as handouts on how to find resources at special student centers or the library, regular workshops specifically geared for the information needs of LGBTQ+ students, and even screenings of LGBTQ+ films can go a long way to building that rapport (Hays 123-124). However, the biggest piece of the puzzle is, not surprisingly, the people involved, because any true, “meaningful inclusion of LGBTQIA+ students goes beyond targeted outreach or programming; it begins with genuine engagement,

attentive listening, and demonstrating care in reference encounters” (Kitzie and Crouse 6). At the same time, one cannot ignore the needs of the people striving to fulfill the students’ information needs. It can even be something as large as sensitivity and microaggression training to as small as making sure that librarians know how to talk to their patrons. Because terminology in and concerning the LGTBQ+ community is constantly evolving, it is important for librarians to develop and maintain contemporary “knowledge of LGBTQ vocabulary is crucial to providing culturally competent assistance” (Siegel et al. 125). Research shows that “when librarians reach out in approachable, friendly ways, to request and listen to patron needs for a collection, we also encourage people to hear what we have to offer” (Pavenick and Martinez 114). Unless librarians can provide what LGBTQ+ students want and need – and express that to the students – and unless students feel comfortable in coming to the librarians for their informational needs, the best collections and programs simply go to waste.

Works Cited

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