Information Policy: Challenges for Libraries

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For our discussion board response for Week 12, our class was asked to consider the following question: *What do you foresee as some of the information policy challenges the library profession will face in the future?* After much reflection, I realized that answering this question, and developing or revising the resulting policies, is one of the most important responsibilities that the next generation of librarians faces. As we have learned through our readings and discussions thus far, the world of information and how we use and access it is rapidly changing, and in order to survive and remain relevant, libraries and their policies have to remain flexible and open to change. Fortunately, the library profession offers a strong foundation of traditional values to help guide decisions and policy-making, suggesting that libraries have the potential to successfully navigate the challenges they face. In considering some of the major policy challenges facing the library profession in the future, I will also consider the professional values that can help library workers to successfully overcome them.

In economically difficult times, such as the present, one major challenge is to sustain library services with less money. This is a problem that libraries have confronted countless times in the past and will undoubtedly continue to confront in the future. The professional values of quality service and easy access to information emphasize the importance of meeting the needs of library users. Balancing user needs with financial strains is very difficult, and efficiency and cost-effectiveness become extremely important. One way that some libraries handle budgetary challenges is by changing or implementing policies such as those governing the lending of library materials. For example, a library may impose stricter borrowing or holds limits, increase fines and fees, or restrict privileges for certain users (such as those qualifying for service through a reciprocal agreement with another library). Policy changes such as these have a direct effect on patron access to library services and information; however, they also help to maximize the

circulation of library materials among the entire community of library users and allow libraries to avoid making cuts to staffing levels, ensuring that they can continue to provide quality service even with constrained budgets. In making decisions on policies such as these, libraries have to seriously weigh the importance of staff and services against patron demand.

Another policy challenge the library profession will continue to face is in defining who is eligible for library service and what is required for membership. In areas with large homeless populations, it can be difficult to establish whether some patrons meet residency requirements. At libraries where children and teenagers often visit without their parents, is it OK to issue a library card to a minor without his or her parent's signature on the application? With more and more people working and studying remotely or traveling extensively for work, how does a library determine if a non-resident qualifies for free service through her employer or school? These are all questions that have to be addressed in libraries' registration policies. Because traditional values have emphasized inclusiveness, policies that allow patrons to qualify for membership in multiple ways will help to ensure that libraries remain open and inclusive. However, libraries should also remain clear and forthcoming about the responsibilities associated with membership so that patrons can make informed decisions about their library usage and avoid surprises such as large fine balances.

As Janny Scott describes in her article "No Longer a Refuge for Readers" (1993), security and code of conduct policies continue to pose a major challenge to libraries today and undoubtedly will in the future. Libraries have to walk a fine line between providing open access and restricting behavior. For example, a library's policy on service animals may dictate that a disabled person can bring his service dog into the library, but if the dog has an offensive odor or barks incessantly, other patrons' use of the library may be compromised. Therefore, it is

important to anticipate how to handle such a situation when developing the policy. The safety of patrons and staff is a central concern of any library, so how it handles security issues has a major impact on the quality of their library visits. If a library fails to provide a safe and secure environment, patrons may even be deterred from visiting; on the other hand, libraries should not exclude people without a valid reason. Libraries can remain inclusive by implementing security and code of conduct policies that emphasize behaviors rather than personal traits. Policies for dealing with violations should emphasize how violators can align their behavior with acceptable standards. For example, the patron with the smelly service dog can be told that he is welcome to use the library without his dog or come back after his dog has had a bath.

One other policy challenge I want to highlight is that of selection and collection development, especially as it pertains to services to special populations. Libraries (especially public libraries) serve diverse communities with diverse needs. The information needs of a non-English speaking immigrant or refugee may be very different from those of a hearing impaired person or a middle school student. A library's selection and collection development policies will directly affect its ability to adequately serve these populations; therefore, it is extremely important for libraries to understand the demographics and needs of their communities and set their policies accordingly. By collecting a broad and diverse array of materials in a variety of formats, libraries can help to ensure that the information needs of all of their users are served.

As libraries deal with the changing landscape of information, technology, and society, they will undoubtedly face numerous policy challenges. Balancing the needs of their users and their staffs with their own organizational obligations can be difficult. By drawing upon their historical values and continuing to reevaluate themselves, their services, and their communities, libraries can help to ensure that they remain relevant, inclusive, and well-used.

References

Scott, Janny (1993, August 10). No longer a refuge for readers. *The Los Angeles Times.*

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