

The Librarian's Dilemma

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Abstract

Librarians who work with incarcerated individuals face the dilemma of being asked to participate in a restrictive system while also adhering to universally accepted intellectual freedom standards. Prison librarians often face dual mistrust: the population they are serving distrusts them in their position of authority, while the prison hierarchy often dismisses their authority since prison administrators have ultimate power over prison library collection development and censorship decisions. In addition to this lack of control, librarians are often expected to simultaneously fulfill the duties of librarians in traditional spaces, by providing information and access to materials; act as a social worker, by providing

rehabilitation and reentry programs; and to work as a government employee, assisting staff in maintaining order and discipline within the institution. All of this frequently happens in conditions with limited budgets, chronic understaffing, insufficient space, and lack of support from prison administrators and the Department of Corrections. The mission of libraries is to provide free and open access to information, thereby creating a dissonance in prison library space. We address how librarians navigate questions of censorship in prisons and discuss whether intellectual freedom can exist in the current U.S. penal system.

Keywords: Prison librarianship, intellectual freedom, censorship, role conflict

