

Restricted Access to Library Materials: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights

Libraries are a traditional forum for the open exchange of information. Restricting access to library materials violates the basic tenets of the American Library Association's *Library Bill of Rights*.

Some libraries block access to certain materials by placing physical or virtual barriers between the user and those materials. For example, materials are sometimes labeled for content or placed in a "locked case," "adults only," "restricted shelf," or "high-demand" collection. Access to certain materials is sometimes restricted to protect them from theft or mutilation, or because of statutory authority or institutional mandate.

In some libraries, access is restricted based on computerized reading management programs that assign reading levels to books and/or users and limit choices to titles on the program's reading list. Titles not on the reading management list have been removed from the collection in some school libraries. Organizing collections by reading management program level, ability, grade, or age level is another example of restricted access. Even though the chronological age or grade level of users is not representative of their information needs or total reading abilities, users may feel inhibited from selecting resources located in areas that do not correspond to their assigned characteristics.

Physical restrictions and content filtering of library resources and services may generate psychological, service, or language skills barriers to access as well. Because restricted materials often deal with controversial, unusual, or sensitive subjects, having to ask a library worker for access to them may be embarrassing or inhibiting for patrons desiring access. Even when a title is listed in the catalog with a reference to its restricted status, a barrier is placed between the patron and the publication.¹ Because restricted materials often feature information that some people consider objectionable, potential library users may be predisposed to think of labeled and filtered resources as objectionable and be discouraged from asking for access to them.

Federal and some state statutes require libraries that accept specific types of federal and/or state funding to install content filters that limit access to Internet resources for minors and adults. Internet filters are applied to Internet resources in some libraries may prevent users from finding targeted categories of information, much of which is constitutionally protected. The use of Internet filters must be addressed through library policies and procedures to ensure that users receive information and that filters do not prevent users from exercising their First Amendment rights. Users have the right to unfiltered access to constitutionally protected information.²

Library policies that restrict access to resources for any reason must be carefully formulated and administered to ensure they do not violate established principles of intellectual freedom. This caution is reflected in ALA policies, such as "Evaluating Library Collections,"³ "Access to Library Resources and Services for Minors,"⁴ "Preservation Policy," and the ACRL "Code of Ethics for Special Collections Librarians."⁵

Donated resources require special consideration. In keeping with the "Joint Statement on Access" of the American Library Association and Society of American Archivists,⁶ libraries should avoid accepting donor agreements or entering into contracts that impose permanent restrictions on special collections. As stated in the "Joint Statement on Access," it is the responsibility of a library with such collections "to make available original research materials in its possession on equal terms of access."

A primary goal of the library profession is to facilitate access to all points of view on current and historical issues. All proposals for restricted access should be carefully scrutinized to ensure that the purpose is not to suppress a viewpoint or to place a barrier between users and content. Libraries must maintain policies and procedures that serve the diverse needs of their users and protect the First Amendment right to receive information.

¹ "Labeling Systems: An Interpretation of the *Library Bill of Rights* (<http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretation/labeling-systems>)," adopted June 30, 2015, by ALA Council.

² "Access to Digital Resources and Services: An Interpretation of the *Library Bill of Rights* (<http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations/digital>)," adopted January 24, 1996 by the ALA Council; amended January 19, 2005; July 15, 2009 *under previous name* "Access to Digital Information, Services, and Networks"; and June 25, 2019.

³ "Evaluating Library Collections: An Interpretation of the *Library Bill of Rights* (<http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations/evaluatinglibrary>)," adopted February 2, 1973, by the ALA Council; amended July 1, 1981; June 2, 2008; and June 25, 2019.

⁴ "Access to Library Resources and Services for Minors: An Interpretation of the *Library Bill of Rights* (<http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations/minors>)," adopted June 30, 1972, by the ALA Council; amended July 1, 1981; July 3, 1991; June 30, 2004; July 2, 2008 *under previous name* "Free Access to Libraries for Minors"; July 1, 2014; and June 25, 2019.

⁵ "Code of Ethics for Special Collections Librarians (http://rbms.info/standards/code_of_ethics/)" approved by ACRL in October 2003.

⁶ "ACRL/SAA Joint Statement on Access to Research Materials in Archives and Special Collections Libraries (<http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/jointstatement>)" Approved by ACRL in July 2009.

Adopted February 2, 1973, by the ALA Council; amended July 1, 1981; July 3, 1991; July 12, 2000; June 30, 2004; January 28, 2009; and July 1, 2014.