

Out of Many, One

Practicing Defensive Librarianship

JAYNE WALTERS

Fifty-two books in Utah's Alpine School District. Forty-three books in Oklahoma. Thirty books in Kansas. Four hundred sixty five books in Pennsylvania's Central York School District; 204 books in Florida; 713 books in Texas, with 435 bans in North East Independent School District. Eight hundred books in Texas legislator Matt Krause's list of books for investigation. The list goes on, the numbers go up, almost all exclusively targeting books by and about people of color and members of the LGBTQIA+ community.

While censorship has long been an issue for libraries, this past year has brought a record number of ban requests across the nation—more than fifteen hundred tracked by PEN America between July 2021 and March 2022. Libraries are also becoming sites for protest—against Drag Queen Story Times, appearances by BIPOC and queer authors, Rainbow Clubs for teens, and other inclusive programming.

With this culture war making libraries a battleground, librarians often become the first (and sometimes only) line of defense for all members of their community. It means embracing the belief that libraries are for *everyone*. One patron may be a vegan who abhors hunting; that doesn't mean removing hunting books. It means including books for the hunter and the vegan alike.

Author Holly Black has spoken at ALA and in interviews about censorship; her message is one we can all strive to achieve—not every book is for everyone, but there should be a book for everyone.

Defensive Librarianship means making sure there are books, tools, information, and resources for everyone. It's important

to create an environment that explicitly welcomes the many, but also explicitly deters the few. We can all practice Defensive Librarianship—both alone, and in tandem.

Each library system needs a robust DEI (diversity, equity, inclusion) committee, and a clear, straight-forward book challenge procedure. Take full advantage of both. Bring issues to your DEI committee to create appropriate, inclusive policy, and use those policies as a shield.

Defensive Librarians need not argue with people who complain about a program or title. They can listen, affirm they have heard the complaint, and refer the complainant to the system. Don't get drawn into arguments or debates about the worthiness of a title or program—let the system do its job.

Defensive Librarianship also lives in the stacks. Note that specific demographic sections—such as those labeled Black Interest or Queer Stories, are outdated and othering. Shelve



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science fiction with science fiction regardless of authorship or protagonist; Octavia Butler belongs next to John Scalzi, period. Romance is romance, and Alice Oseman's Heartstopper series should sit quite comfortably next to *There's Something About Sweetie* by Sandyha Menon.

If you're in a location where protests or "observers" from various organizations are common, curate the audience for your programs to increase safety and success. For example, try limiting teen programming to teens only, asking for free sign-ups for events like Drag Queen Story Time, and always have a librarian present for a program in case of interruption. Do not be afraid to step in to direct question and answer sessions, or to cut off an antagonistic observer.

While some might think that inviting law enforcement to these programs is a way to help deter disruption, it's important to keep in mind that this could be off putting to marginalized groups and may deter people you want to welcome.

If you have a community that's likely to challenge Black Lives Matters or Pride Month displays, consider creating Award-Winners displays. You can feature all Stonewall or Pura Belpré or Coretta Scott King award-winners, so that the books are still celebrated—just in a way that is quantifiable by quality rather than identity. Make inclusive displays of genres and categories. Treat books by marginalized people the same way you treat mainstream books. Elevate the voices of smaller authors that are often overshadowed by popular favorites like James Patterson, Dav Pilkey, Mo Willems, Jeff Kinney, and others.

Do the marginalized people in your community know they're welcome in your library? It's easy to create a welcoming space with subtle touches. Inobtrusive stickers on monitors, small flags, a pronoun pin on your lanyard, even choices of colors can create an environment that feels safe to marginalized people.

National flag colors can also make your library more inviting—try including flags from the nationalities that make up your community in all your displays and in decoration. LGBTQIA+ people, especially teens, will pick up on different configurations of pride colors without signaling to a less accepting community. If you're unsure of who is in your community that might not be in your library, use SAVI (one of the country's first and largest online community information systems) to get an overview of your service area. I've heard librarians and managers say, "We don't have LGBTQIA+ patrons," and they're wrong. You might not know who they are, but they are there.

Acknowledging that people are not a monolith can be as simple as a construction paper flag on a Popsicle stick in your pen

cup or a sticker on your water bottle. It can also be as simple as celebrating the many holidays around the world in December, not just Christmas and Hannukah. Even better; continue it throughout the year.

Actively involve your local community, to make sure milestones and celebrations for all people are equally valued. An especially popular way to introduce new cultures in your library is authentic food-centered programming. It's a way to bridge between people that's both entertaining and educational. If you feed them, they will come.

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few.*

Of course, we must consider our books. Don't be scared off by the possibility that a book might be challenged. Budgets are tight, but buying a book that a queer teen will connect with and having it challenged is better than not having it on the shelf at all. Don't make it easy for oppressors. Make them have to fight to have it pulled.

Practice inclusive shelving, and don't sticker books with specific identities. This makes it difficult for some marginalized people to actually use them. Instead, curate current booklists of interest to different groups. Engage all the librarians in your branch; encourage them to create lists of special interest to *them*, as well as specific groups.

Each librarian should have a copy of each list, to help make recommendations even if it's out of their personal scope. And with

these personalized lists, it should be easy to refer patrons to the librarian who knows the most about their interests—whatever those interests may be. If they feel comfortable doing it, add a tag at the bottom to help direct patrons to those librarians—"For more great recommendations like these, see Ms. Jayne."

Remember, you do not have to be tolerant of intolerance. The American Library Association rescinded 2018 changes to "Meeting Rooms: An Interpretation of the *Library Bill of Rights*," which initially endorsed and included hate groups and hate speech as permissible and acceptable in public libraries.¹ The Council overwhelmingly voted to rescind this stance on the logic that libraries cannot make a community feel safe and welcome when people actively advocating against their safety and inclusion are permitted to share the same space. Defensive Librarians will take advantage of local library resources, but be unafraid to employ national and international resources when necessary.

Library board members often aren't librarians. Get to know the board and help educate them on the importance of inclusion and diversity in the stacks. Sometimes you might have to build your defense and that can encourage library advocates

to run for board positions both in libraries and in schools, or even doing it yourself. Small and local elections can make or break a librarian's local support network when it comes to fighting censorship and systemic racism.

Despite how it might look and feel at times, you're not alone in this fight. You're part of something much bigger—an entire community of libraries across the world that you have access to at your fingertips. Chances are that someone, somewhere, has hit an obstacle, gotten pushback, felt backlash, or faced the same issue that you are trying to deal with. Reach out.

There are more ways to practice Defensive Librarianship—and it's a field wide open for new practices.

With a combination of structural integrity (DEI and book challenge protocols), community engagement, and inclusive

practices, your library can be a place for everyone. Actively inviting marginalized people into a space that you've made safe and welcoming is what brings communities together.

Out of many, one—one community that contains, shares, and uplifts the many within it—let's make sure the library is a strong foundation for it all. &

Reference

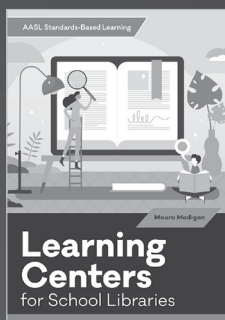
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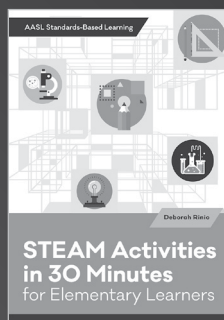
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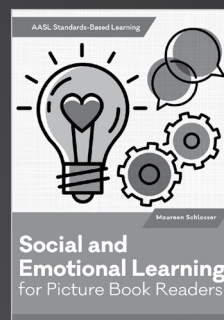
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