

“Community Use, Community Pressure, and Intellectual Freedom: Do Academic Libraries Need to Worry?”

By Diane Sybeldon
Arts and Media Librarian
Wayne State University

Bob Holley, Chairman of ACRL’s Intellectual Freedom Committee introduced the speakers who described situations at their institutions that have challenged their mission of service to the academic as well as outside communities.

The first speaker, Martin Garner is a Reference Librarian at Regis University, a private, Jesuit university of 16,000 students in Denver. Students are primarily older adult learners. The university has a partnership with the public school system and in addition has filled a gap in access for nearby Denver Public Library patrons.

He described problems that emerged in 2000 when the bulk of the university’s computers were relocated to the library, making it the central computing facility on campus. Until then the library had provided unrestricted access as well as free printing. However problems surfaced with community patrons which included patrons overusing printers, truant teens playing video games, drunks napping, and patrons accessing Internet pornography. Since Regis has a religious affiliation, the issue of users viewing pornography added a perception problem.

In order to deal with these and other problems the library felt a need to set limitations and began to phase in a number of new policies. Computer access for community patrons was restricted to computers near the Reference desk; offenders were identified; and time limits were set. Community users were also reminded that Regis is a private not public institution. But available services were promoted in a positive way. Enforcement of new policies was problematic, since librarian styles and attitudes differed greatly.

What is next on the agenda is to charge a fee for printing; enforce time limits and designate computers for specific types of activities i.e., library catalog versus word processing. One thing that is not on the agenda: filtering.

Overall Regis is happy with the adjustments they made. However in terms of their impact on Intellectual Freedom, some concerns were expressed: restricting access and therefore prohibiting access to needed information; loss of privacy; infringement of basic civil liberties.

The second speaker, Cindy (Chricinda) McGee, Computer Services Librarian at Wayne State University, described similar experiences with community users as well as similar programs that have been put in place. Wayne State is an urban university in Detroit, with over 33,000 students. The student population is diverse and includes a large number of African American and Arab American students. Wayne State has a commitment to the neighboring community and is located close to the main Detroit Public Library as well as several local public schools.

Though the Library System includes five libraries, the Undergraduate Library became a focus of attention when it opened in 1997, because of the large number of computers there – over 300.

Upon opening, access was unrestricted, though printing was not free. However, problems with community users became evident and is similar to Regis' description, including disruptive and/or truant teens, users who circumvented computer systems, users accessing pornography in full view of other patrons, homeless patrons etc. Students also complained that they could not find an open computer because community patrons were using them.

Restrictions were adopted, and through trial and error resulted in twenty four Community Access Terminals (“CATS”) located in one area. Time limits were also created.

In exploring solutions Wayne State referred often to the ALA Intellectual Freedom Principles values statement.

An example of this: In order to protect the privacy of community users computer monitors were purchased with screens recessed below table top level. Two versions of LABMAN software were implemented, which allowed community users to have their own login ID. The latest enforces automatic time limits and creates an electronic waiting list. It is also capable of tracking computer use but this will not be carried out without a court order.

Problems of safety expressed by staff also led to the hiring of library monitors who were hired to deal with problem situations.

However some problems remain such as community users sharing their logins. In response, patrons must now provide a picture ID each semester to receive a login. A revoked login list for problem patrons and those on criminal trespass is now kept.

What's on the agenda: training student staff on the importance of intellectual freedom; insisting that librarians be brought to the table when matters involving intellectual freedom are discussed at the university.

As with Regis, Wayne State does not filter, in keeping with a Michigan Law passed in 2000.

The last speaker, Kevin Cherry, Visiting Instructor from East Carolina University, spoke about the pressures that came to bear over a freshman reading assignment. He addressed the issue of maintaining academic freedom in the face of media controversy.

Approaching the Qur'an: the Early Revelations was the 2002 Carolina Summer Reading Program selection for freshmen and transfer students.

Offered as an opportunity for students to understand other cultures, the program came within a year of the 9/11 tragedy and its selection was sharply criticized by media personalities Britt Hume and Bill O'Reilly on the Fox News Channel, and by the Christian-conservative Family Policy Network and its president, Joe Glover, as well as angry locals concerned about the separation of church and state.

The university responded by publishing a disclaimer on their web site, not grading assignments, and offering students the option of writing a one page essay about why they refused to read the book, which inflamed the Family Policy Network. The case reached the North Carolina General Assembly and the U. S Court of Appeals but was ultimately rejected.

Despite the trouble, some of the lessons learned about democracy include the notions that with cable television and the Internet, there is a 24 hour news cycle and "a small number of people can cause a ruckus"; that "book discussions still teach" and "reading is relevant and powerful"; and that "the university must not be complacent. Academic freedom is important"

A question and answer discussion followed the speaker presentations.