

December 2019 Tuesday Topic
Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Intellectual Freedom

Welcome to Tuesday Topics, a monthly series covering topics with intellectual freedom implications for libraries of all types. Each message is prepared by a member of OLA's Intellectual Freedom Committee or a guest writer. Questions can be directed to the author of the topic or to the IFC Committee.



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Libraries are increasingly recognizing the need to ensure that principles of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) are central to their mission. Often, in discussion of EDI matters, however, intellectual freedom is rhetorically placed in opposition to those values. Just this month, the Chief Librarian of the Seattle Public Library, Marcellus Turner, [released a statement](#) about an anti-transgender group making use of the library's meeting space, saying, "We have heard from patrons who believe we should not let this event happen in a Library space due to the group's views. We have heard from others who say that not allowing this event to happen will endanger the Library's founding principle of intellectual freedom."

And it is true that at times there is tension between these values, as Meredith Farkas describes in her November 1, 2018 "In Practice" column for American Libraries, "[When Values Collide: Reconciling our commitments when hate speech is involved](#)." There are no easy answers when the presence of a group in the library may cause other patrons, particularly patrons from historically marginalized groups, to feel endangered.

However, the same legal precedents that make situations like the above fraught, also help ensure that marginalized and underrepresented groups are able to access these same meeting spaces, and protect the library's ability to continue to offer diverse programming in the community. Recently, a Drag Queen Story Hour in [St. Mary's County, Maryland](#), held by an outside group in the library's meeting room space, [attracted protests](#) and required a police presence to ensure the safety of attendees and library staff. In response, the St. Mary's County Commission removed funds from the library's budget to pay for this increased security presence, telling the library staff that "they should avoid having such controversial events and that their funding may be affected if they continued to have controversial events." This prompted a strongly worded statement from the [Maryland Attorney General](#) citing case law demonstrating that the actions on the part of the County Commissioners were unconstitutional. The decision to financially penalize the library has since been reversed.

However, the values of intellectual freedom and EDI don't "just happen" to coincide in cases like the above. As is stated in *Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion: An Interpretation of the [Library Bill of Rights](#)*, "equity, diversity, and inclusion are central to the promotion and practice of intellectual freedom."

If a library patron is further marginalized or denied access due to their background, financial status, abilities, race, or other factors, it follows that their freedom to freely read and access information is being directly impinged. This is most obvious in the historical context of segregation of libraries in the [Jim Crow South](#), but also serves as a powerful reminder that libraries must be alert to creating barriers through inequitable policies, as well as to actions from publishers and vendors (as in the case of the recent [Macmillan embargo](#)) that worsen access for our patrons. A diverse collection that reflects a wide range of life experiences, as well as programming and policies that are inclusive of the entire community are central to both EDI and intellectual freedom work, as well -- and a review of books and programs [challenged in Oregon](#) demonstrates that it is often the voices of underrepresented and marginalized people who are directly challenged.

Ultimately, just as intellectual freedom is a central value in librarianship, so too is EDI -- and they are inextricably linked.

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