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# Where's the "T"?: Improving Library Service to Community Members who are Transgender-Identified

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**Abstract**

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While efforts have been made in recent years to improve library service to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) identified library users, these efforts have generally overlooked the particular needs of transgender communities.  As LIS professionals, we are called to provide library service to all members of our communities, particularly those who have traditionally been marginalized.  This bibliographic essay provides a look at the unique information needs and barriers to library service which library users who are transgender-identified commonly face, as well as those resources which can assist libraries in ensuring they are adequately meeting the needs of these communities.


**Keywords**: Bibliographic Essay | transgender | LGBT | Library Service | Library Users | Marginalized Communities | Trans | Information Needs | Information Seeking Behavior | Barriers to Information Access

**Introduction**

According to the ALA Library Bill of Rights, libraries and librarians have a professional obligation to provide equitable access to resources and library services for all members of their community, regardless of sex, gender identity, or sexual orientation (ALA 2004).  In the past decade, there have been a number of efforts to promote library service to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals (Greenblatt 2000; Garner 2000; Hamer 2003; Schaller 2011; Boon and Howard 2004).  However, most of the published research deals only with service to lesbian and gay (and occasionally bisexual) library users.  Those library users who identify as transgender are typically overlooked in these studies and recorded efforts, despite their presence in the LGBT acronym and in library user communities, whether or not they are immediately visible.  As library and information science (LIS) professionals, it is extremely important to continue to work to consider the needs of these members of our community, particularly because research has shown that they have unique information needs as compared to their LGB counterparts and because they experience multiple barriers to good library service (Beiriger and Jackson 2007; McKay 2011; Taylor 2002).

In this bibliographic essay, I will present the resources that exist to help LIS professionals understand the main issues in providing service to the members of their communities who are transgender and examine some of the themes that arise from these voices, with the goal of assisting LIS professionals who are working to provide better library services to transgender individuals.   Although the literature is full of unexplored areas and gaps, the literature does show that there are specific and often overlooked information needs and information seeking behaviors that trans individuals commonly experience (Beiriger and Jackson 2007; Otto 2011; Taylor 2002).  Library collection development and services need updates in order to be relevant and welcoming to these community members.  Additionally, by

meeting the needs of trans communities, libraries will also promote the education of those members of the community who are cis-gendered (or, non-transgendered), building better citizens and promoting acceptance. Libraries planning to implement outreach in this area can consult a number of articles and resources which provide insight into the specific information needs of the trans community, as well as case studies of libraries which have consciously expanded their trans outreach.

## Epistemological Approach

Before I address the literature, I think it is important to briefly address my particular stake in this issue and the privileges that necessarily inform my perspective. I write about this issue as an aspiring ally, but most importantly, as a cis-gendered person writing about transgender communities. I am not an expert on transgender issues, nor do I have the audacity to assume that I understand what transgender experiences are like, nor that every transgender life by any means follows my generalizations or assumptions, or those in the literature I am reviewing.

What I can say is that I am an LIS professional in training, and I approach this issue as a [recent] insider to this profession and the roles that it can play in helping or hindering information access to members of our library communities, particularly those who are marginalized and experience discrimination. I approach this subject from a place of humility, but also a place of power: I must acknowledge the fact that from my future position as a white, cis-gender female in the LIS profession I may someday have influence over how service to library users is provided, and it is my duty as a member of the aforementioned majority group to work to eliminate oppressions and barriers to minority groups as our liberations are intertwined and interdependent. I have attempted to use C. Jacob Hale's guidelines for non-trans folks writing about trans-identified people while putting together this project (Hale 1997).

In this essay I use the word "transgender" as an umbrella term to encompass many of the individual trans communities under one moniker. PFLAG's publication, *Welcoming Our Trans Family and Friends* is a great resource for cis-gendered people who wish to educate themselves about trans issues. It includes this definition of "transgender":

> "Transgender, or simply "trans," is an umbrella term used to describe those who transcend conventional expectations of gender identity or expression. Like any umbrella term, many different groups of people, with different histories and experiences, get associated within the greater trans community – such groups include, but are certainly not limited to, people who identify as transsexual, genderqueer, gender variant, gender diverse, androgynous, etc. A transgender person is someone whose gender identity does not correspond with their sex assigned at birth." (p13) (PFLAG 2008)

For more information surrounding these terms (definitions, questions of their validity or lack thereof) please refer to the PFLAG publication, or one of the many sources cited in this paper.

## Information Needs

There are two articles in particular which bring to light the unique information needs common to members of trans communities. The first, "An Assessment of the Information Needs of Transgender Communities in Portland, Oregon" by Angie Beiriger, MLS and Rose M. Jackson, MLIS uses the format of a community survey. With this method they do what any good librarian would do: ask their users what they need and want. Their study found that the needs of trans individuals are quite different than those of LGB individuals previously documented in the literature. Their information needs tend to be more sustained throughout their lifespan (versus more of a single peak around coming-out for LGB individuals), as the individuals meet new challenges in their transition process (p46). The information-seekers in

these surveys also expressed a need for very specific types of information, primarily legal, health, emotional, and information via computers and the internet.

Examples of the kind of legal information required included legal name changes, how to change government identification to reflect the appropriate sex, discrimination issues, filing for insurance appeals as many insurance companies do not cover sex reassignment surgeries (SRS) or hormone replacement therapy (HRT), and issues surrounding legality of marriage, whether pre-existing or forthcoming (p52, 57). There were also a number of concerns surrounding medical information and accessing trustworthy information regarding transitioning, HRT, and finding a health-care provider who is welcoming and affirming (p52, 57). (Beiriger and Jackson 2007)

The second article, "Targeting the Information Needs of Transgender Individuals" by Jami Kathleen Taylor, also centers around a survey of a small number of transgender individuals. This study again brings out information needs specific to these communities, particularly issues surrounding identity, finding support groups and counselors, activism, appearance, and safety issues (p92-93). (Taylor 2002) While both of these surveys offer librarians the opportunity to listen to the needs of trans communities, it is also very important to realize that they represent very specific and relatively small sample sizes, so the trans communities in other library service areas could have other needs not mentioned, or might not experience any of the above needs.

### Information-Seeking Behaviors and Barriers to Access

One of the most striking pieces of information that these studies bring to light is a very clearly expressed preference for online information. Information retrieval over the internet was the top choice for both of the surveyed communities, and the reasons are not hard to see. For a good discussion of the types of discrimination and barriers that LGBT people in general face

when seeking library services, see (Greenblatt 2000; Garner 2000; Hamer 2003; Schaller 2011; Boon and Howard 2004; Seborg 2005; Greenblatt 2010).  The main barriers cited in these works fall into the categories of collection development, transphobic and/or homophobic library staff, fear of being "outed", lack of feeling safe in approaching library staff, difficulty in determining the trustworthiness of internet-based resources, and difficulties in selecting search terms and using the controlled vocabulary.

It has been documented in the literature that because of these barriers, the majority of trans community members surveyed prefer to use the internet as their main source of information access (Shapiro 2004; Hegland and Nelson 2002; Otto 2005; Thompson 2010; Beiriger and Jackson 2007; Taylor 2002).  This will be further addressed in the following three sections.

## Collection Development and Searchability

Trans communities tend to rank libraries very low on their list of preferred information providers (Beiriger and Jackson 2007; Otto 2005; Taylor 2002).  The first and second choices for information sources were the internet and friends in the trans community, respectively (Beiriger and Jackson 2007; Adams and Pierce 2006).  Beyond the larger concerns of staff acceptance and privacy, the main reason given for not seeing the library as a top choice is that most library collections are not current enough or extensive enough to appropriately meet information needs.  In this instance, community members, bookstores and online trans community resources were consulted instead (Beiriger and Jackson 2007; Taylor 2002; Thompson 2010).  An aggressive collection development plan as well as improving searchability of collections can help to improve these impressions of libraries.

In order to eliminate this barrier, the Oak Park Public Library (OPPL) in Illinois adopted a very strategic collection development plan to ensure the creation of a truly inclusive collection for their library.  Their *Transgender Resource Collection Library Toolkit* is an amazing resource

for the library needing a jumping-off point to begin transitioning their collection into a relevant one.  A few of the resources it offers for collection development assistance include the "$200 Transgender Bookshelf" which is a list of eleven recommended books and other media: a low-budget way for a library to get a good start on their trans-focused collection.  The toolkit also includes the OPPL's own collection evaluations to help librarians in evaluating their library's existing collection (Benton 2009).

Several good resources exist to aid librarians in selecting books with transgender issues, themes, and voices.  One of the important needs expressed by the trans communities who were surveyed was to hear the stories and voices of other people who are transgendered, to provide assurance that they are not alone, and perhaps give them an idea of what their own future might hold (Adams and Pierce 2006).  Biography (especially autobiography) was a frequently sought out genre.  For a selection guide and bibliography of appropriate titles, Nancy Silverrod et al's "TRANScending Identities: A Bibliography of Resources on Transgender and Intersex Topics" is thorough and well chosen (Silverrod et al. 2008).  The Lambda Literary awards, the Stonewall Book Awards, and the ALA Over the Rainbow book awards are also established places to seek appropriate titles.  For libraries building a collection from scratch on a shoestring budget, the OPPL's "$200 Transgender Bookshelf" is, again, a solid list of the most popular and widely accepted trans resources (Benton 2009).

Elsworth I. Rockefeller provides a cogent discussion of selecting and defending transgender-inclusive literature for young adults in his article "Selection, Inclusion, Evaluation and Defense of Transgender-Inclusive Fiction for Young Adults: A Resource Guide."  From selection, to cataloguing practices that enable teens to easily find resources, to evaluating content and being prepared to deal with censorship and other challenges to intellectual freedom, his discussion handles many of the sensitive topics that librarians will need to consider when building a collection.  The article also includes insightful and valuable comments on

specific titles and resource lists (Rockefeller 2009).  Although it can be a challenge to begin a collection in unfamiliar territory, resources abound to aid librarians in educating themselves.

An important article to take into consideration when cataloguing a transgender resource collection for searchability is "Transgender Subject Access: History and Current Practice" by Matt Johnson.  This article explains many of the issues in cataloguing under the transgender subject headings, and illuminates why these resources can be hidden even when they are present in collections.  By cataloguing under appropriate and varied subject headings, librarians can increase access to the resources they have selected and increase the visibility and accessibility of transgender experiences within the library catalog (Johnson 2010).

### Library Staff

Regardless of their intentions, library staff themselves can be a barrier to information access for transgender individuals.  Patrons may simply be afraid of "outing" themselves, especially in a small community.  However, many LGBT library users in the articles cited above also reported discrimination and clear disinterest and discomfort from library staff when approached for assistance in accessing information.  Because of past negative interactions, many LGBT library users then became reluctant to consider the library as a valuable resource in the future.

Libraries should proactively train staff members to be sensitive not only to sexual orientation, but to gender identity issues.  The OPPL library toolkit has an excellent packet of scenarios that staff can practice together to gain comfort in talking about gender identity, to practice proper pronoun usage, and to promote a culture of acceptance and understanding among staff (Benton 2009).  Libraries should consider conducting a trans awareness workshop as a staff in-service.  The OPPL toolkit includes that library's "Self Study Report" from 2007, in which they planned the concrete changes they were going to make in their library.  This report

contains information about their particular staff training, which may be helpful to libraries seeking to implement something similar (Grimm et al. 2007). Many trans community organizations offer outreach for such trainings, although it is incredibly important not to place the burden of educating the privileged group on the group which is facing discrimination. There are examples in the social work literature of such possible self-education. The article "Bending Gender, Ending Gender: Theoretical Foundations for Social Work Practice with the Transgender Community" by Barb J. Burdge is a great example of how those professionals who work with the public can start to interrogate the gender binary in their work to become better at serving their constituents (Burdge 2007).

Privacy is a huge issue in providing adequate library service to trans-identified community members. Coming out can pose many risks to an individual. Potential loss of employment, loss of family, discrimination, personal violence, and emotional trauma are all common risks to trans persons who are outed. To ensure patron privacy, libraries should consider installing self-checkout kiosks so that patrons can check out their own materials and can avoid displaying publicly or to a staff member (frequently student employees in academic and some public libraries) the materials they are using (Mathson and Hancks 2007). If a library's technological infrastructure can support it, online account access for renewals as well as account management can also promote privacy (Mathson and Hancks 2007).

Another way that technology can promote better privacy and information access is to provide not only in-person reference, but virtual reference. In her article "I Wouldn't Normally Ask This …: Or, Sensitive Questions and Why People Seem More Willing to Ask Them at a Virtual Reference Desk," Samantha Thompson relays the stories of two parallel experiences she has had answering reference questions for transgender patrons both in person and online. While the questions seemed to flow freely and confidently from the anonymous online information seeker, it was much more difficult for the in-person patron to ask the questions they

needed to ask.  Although the librarian was more than willing to offer her services and this was

the New York Public Library, as opposed to a small town in the rural Midwest, the taboo is still

present.  While ultimately she gave the same information on relevant library holdings as well as

online resources and information regarding finding a support group to both patrons, it was

obvious that the in-person interaction generated much more worry and potential for emotional

trauma.  (Thompson 2010)

Although it is great to be able to provide virtual reference, it is also important to work to

make our libraries welcoming, safe spaces as well.  Libraries should consider designating a

gender-neutral restroom (this can double as a "family" restroom) and either eliminating or

modifying the area on applications for library cards or employment which require indicating a

sex or gender (Benton 2009).  Making certain that all who enter the library's doors feel welcome

and do not face the risk of being bullied or scorned should be seen as an essential role of the

LIS profession.

### Internet Resources

Despite librarians' best efforts to create welcoming libraries, it is still very clear from the

research that trans communities prefer seeking information via the internet.  Not only does this

ensure privacy and anonymity where desired, but it is widely accessible for many (although not

all—which reinforces the importance of the role of the public library in providing internet access

to those with less financial privilege).  Because it is the library's duty to determine what their

users need and want, I suggest that perhaps one of the most effective forms of outreach that

libraries can provide would be internet guides—or Libguides.

By creating internet guides, librarians can help their patrons to find reliable information

easily and privately.  An example of one such guide is Aurora, Colorado's Libguide for gay,

lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and queer studies , which can be found at

http://guides.auraria.edu/glbtq. More places to glean resources include librarian John Otto's personal webpage, which includes many talks that he has given regarding the information needs of trans communities, as well as links to other web resources (Otto 2011), and the National Center for Transgender Equality website (http://transequality.org). Libraries could also point to a medical library in their community or area to provide trustworthy health information, as well as websites which can help to answer legal questions. Again, librarian John Otto's website provides a great jumping-off point for both of these reference areas (Otto 2011).

The internet guide can also be a place for a library to advertise the print materials in its collection, as well as providing options for inter-library loan of recommended books the library may not own. It can also be a place to promote the work that they are undertaking to be a welcoming, inclusive, safe space. It is important to realize that although providing excellent online resources many not immediately increase a library's physical gate count, it may be the most accessible way for a library to offer specific services, which is the bottom line of customer service. Good virtual service may eventually lead to patrons being comfortable seeking in-person service.

## Community Examples

For libraries just starting their outreach to the transgender individuals in their community, there are many good examples of libraries making it happen well. The previously mentioned Oak Park Public Library (OPPL) has turned their experience into a toolkit for libraries. Oakland, California's public library has three branches with lesbian, gay, and transgender resources shelved together as a special collection (http://www.oaklandlibrary.org/services.html#special). The San Francisco Public Library also boasts the James C. Hormel Gay and Lesbian Center, which also includes transgender resources (San Francisco Public Library). Their website also includes the valuable bibliography by Nancy Silverrod, "TRANScending Identities: A Bibliography of Resources on Gender Variance, Transgender and Intersex Topics"(Silverrod et

al. 2008), which is also cited on the ALA's GLBT round table website (ALA GLBTRT 2008). The Center also produces an amazing blog, "Queerest. Library. Ever." (San Francisco Public Library 2011).

## Conclusions

Attempts to promote effective library service to the LGBT community have by and large overlooked the "T," or the transgender members of their communities. Libraries should consider it a part of their professional duty to work to provide inclusive services to those members of their communities who are transgender, as well as providing educational resources for cis-gendered community members seeking to understand and accept their fellow community members. When attempting to meet the needs of these communities, it is important to consider the unique and specific needs common to trans individuals and to interrogate the ways in which the particular library may create or remove barriers to information access. These barriers may include library staff, non-existent or outdated collections, lack of privacy, and fear. Libraries can look to a number of examples in the literature for advice on improving services, building a collection of materials, and creating effective online resources for their library users, including those cis-gendered community members seeking to educate themselves about transgender issues.

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