Statement of Competency A

A. Articulate the ethics, values and foundational principles of library and information professionals and their role in the promotion of intellectual freedom

The Library Bill of Rights states, “…all libraries are forums for information and ideas”. My idea of a forum is an open space in which people are free to come and go as they wish and express themselves as their conscience dictates. I have also thought of the library as being a “safe haven” or sanctuary in which information seekers are free to openly seek out information that will benefit them in which ever way they personally deem necessary, be it intellectually, professionally, vocationally and otherwise.

Documents such as the Library Bill of Rights and its interpretations enable librarians to present and promote the ethics and ideals of library as a haven for intellectual freedom. The principles put forth in the Library Bill of Rights are derived from principles that are enshrined in the United States Bill of Rights and the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, and also serve as a statement of ideals by which libraries strive to put these rights into practice to protect the rights of library users to seek whatever information their consciences dictate, and to do so without fear of scrutiny by government or private groups, or fear of judgment.

However, in order to protect the intellectual freedom of our users, it is not enough to merely state what we are for or against regarding the rights of our users. Protection of rights takes action, meaning that we must also take steps to protect our users against encroachments on their freedom from governmental organizations or from private citizens, who whether individually or in groups seek to impose restrictions on access to information. These restrictions come in many forms, such as those who would seek to have certain books banned from libraries that are deemed to be “inappropriate”, or

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by putting Internet filters in place on computers owned by public libraries. Another means by which libraries can protect users’ intellectual freedom is by protecting the privacy of their information seeking practices by keeping their library search records confidential. Unfortunately, recent history has proved that the fear of government intrusion into the privacy of library users is very real indeed, as was made evidence by the passage and extension of the USA PATRIOT Act. Libraries took the lead in protesting this law and have sought to have it overturned.

Privacy is crucial to intellectual freedom, in that if people do not feel that they have a space where they are safe from having their actions scrutinized or judged, then they will be less likely to use libraries and they will limit their own pursuit of knowledge. This would also send the message that some subjects are off-limits and are not to be pursued. The combination of these two factors results in a population that is less likely to partake in intellectual pursuits for fear of scrutiny or punishment, and is therefore also less likely to speak up against injustices done by the government or other figures of authority. Indeed, the right to express one’s opinion without fear of reprisals is one of the key features of our society, and has enabled us to have a vibrant and democratic society since it was founded.

Evidence

1. LIBR 200 – Information and Society – The Library and Intellectual Freedom:

This was my final paper for LIBR 200 (Information and Society) in which I outlined the role that libraries play in protecting intellectual freedom, as well as the principles on which libraries’ defense of intellectual freedom is founded. These include the idea of rights, as embodied in the United States Bill of Rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as the philosophical principal of utilitarianism, which holds that the idea of intellectual freedom (for our purposes) provides the greatest good for the greatest number of people. However, libraries and
organizations such as the American Library Association (ALA), the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and others must remain constantly vigilant for those who would seek to use user records (including bookstore records) as a means by which to pursue a criminal prosecution, especially through such laws as the USA PATRIOT Act.

2. LIBR 234 – Intellectual Freedom Seminar – Filtering Assignment

This paper was written for LIBR 234 (Intellectual Freedom Seminar), and examines the negative impact that Internet filters in libraries have on intellectual freedom. Filters are imperfect in that they search for keywords and block websites based on those keywords, whether or not the terms in question are reflective of content of the site. An example is a website about autism being blocked as it was labeled by the filter as “gambling”. The ALA states that blocking websites based on supposed content or arbitrary categories is prejudicial and is therefore a form of labeling. Labels are considered to be a form of editorializing regarding content on the part of a library’s staff and can have the effect of causing patrons to eschew certain items in a library’s collection.

Unfortunately, many libraries put filters in place to comply with the Children’s Internet Protection Act (CIPA) that allows them to qualify for federal funding. Filtering can also be detrimental to users who live in rural or impoverished areas and who rely on libraries as their only option for connecting to the Internet. When these libraries put filters on their computers, they are denying their users full access to information that is available to people who have Internet access at home.


For this assignment for LIBR 234 (Intellectual Freedom Seminar), our task was to write to a member of congress to ask him or her to allow Section 215 of the USA PATRIOT Act to expire at the end of 2009, rather than allow it to be renewed until 2013. Section 215 is the section that
imposes a gag order on all people served with a National Security Letter (NSL) related to a
subpoena for records under the USA PATRIOT Act. Librarians are particularly at risk for this kind
of action due to their access to users’ private records. Recipients of NSLs risk prison time if they
disclose that they have received one. Furthermore, as librarians are forced to surrender users’
records to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), this means that users’ records are not truly
private. People may be reluctant to use libraries if they are aware that records of their private
information-seeking practices can be surrendered to the federal government upon request. This
will have a chilling effect on intellectual inquiry and expression.

Criteria for Selecting the Evidence

I feel these works demonstrate not only my understanding of key concepts of intellectual
freedom, but also how these concepts come into play in the real world. In other words, these are not
abstract concepts, but instead stem from the experiences of librarians who have had to defend
themselves and their institutions against challenges from those who would try to impose limits on what
information can be made available to other patrons, regardless of age, social status, language and
economic status. In addition to those who would impose limits, there are those who would seek to intrude
upon the privacy of library users by seeking user records under the cover of law. As the letter to Sen.
Specter demonstrates, it is also the right of citizens to speak up against encroachments on freedom of
expression by the government.

Conclusion

I feel that these works present an understanding of how actions that have infringed on peoples’
individual rights of expression have influenced others to ensure that such infringements do not take
place in the future, by codifying principles that people will strive to live by. Documents such as the
Library Bill of Rights and the United States Bill of Rights are not merely statements of principle, but calls to action. One cannot simply draft a declaration of principles and expect the problem to be solved. As has been seen throughout history, it takes constant vigilance and action to ensure that the rights of people to free self-expression on the societal level and intellectual freedom in libraries are protected.