Getting to Know the Factors That Influence Today’s Academic Libraries

by GWEN M. GREGORY

Protecting Intellectual Freedom in Your Academic Library: Scenarios from the Front Lines
by Barbara M. Jones
Chicago: American Library Association, 2009
ISBN: 978-0-8389-3580-4
256 pages; $55, softcover

Traditionally, librarians have been strong promoters of intellectual freedom and privacy rights. In the academic world, great value is placed on the freedom to think, speak, and research freely.

While academic libraries may not face the same challenges as school and public libraries (because academic libraries generally don’t have a large population of users under the age of 18), they still face significant intellectual freedom issues, and many of those are related to the use of the internet. Any academic librarian will want to know what he or she can expect in this area, especially the directors of academic libraries.

Author Barbara Jones, who is currently the university librarian at Wesleyan University, taught a course on intellectual freedom at the University of Wisconsin–Madison’s School of Library and Information Studies. She also wrote the book Libraries, Access, and Intellectual Freedom (ALA, 1999). Her academic library career gave her the chance to experience many different situations, and her involvement in the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) provides her with an international perspective. In this new book, she introduces issues revolving around intellectual freedom in academic libraries along with a number of case studies, and she offers advice on being ready for the challenges you may face.

She begins with a discussion of the various campus constituencies that academic librarians work with, including faculty, administrations, state legislatures, boards of trustees, students, technology services, alumni, and the general community. Each has its own view about the library, privacy, and intellectual freedom.

Addressing Current Themes

Jones also highlights a few current themes in academia: academic freedom, 9/11 and the ensuing tightening of national security rules, campus civility codes, the move to new methods of assessment, and declining budgets. She also points out that public and private institutions of higher education have different responsibilities to their communities; public institutions must abide by state and federal regulations as government entities.

Following the extensive introduction, the book’s five chapters use real-world examples to help readers understand “how academic librarians can promote their professional values within an operational level, within a campus context that is not always responsive to or aware of the ideals of intellectual freedom.”

The first chapter brings us up-to-date with current trends in academic libraries, such as information literacy and the library as a place. Jones emphasizes that academic libraries need to have intellectual freedom policies in place and recommends a number of publications of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) as resources.

The second chapter moves on to collection development, where she highlights the American Library Association’s Office for Intellectual Freedom (www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/offices/ofif/index.cfm) as an excellent source of information. The case studies in this chapter are instructive: a “heretical” work purchased by a conservative Christian college library, a “scholarly unsound” work used for historical or other research purposes at a secular academic library, and a “fake” scholarly work that may have research value. Faculty, administrators, and students may object to each of these, and librarians must be prepared to defend their decisions. This is another situation when well-defined written policies come in handy.

Conflicts Over Internet Access

The next chapter focuses on the huge topic of internet access. While academic libraries don’t have the demands for filtering and protection of children that public and school libraries may face, there are still conflicts. Some of these stem from differences between how library services work and how IT services work. IT services often focus on what is prohibited and on watching the systems, rather than on the rights of users. The library and IT department are best served by discussing their policies and making sure there are no conflicts before a situation arises.

Campus codes of conduct may also include internet use policies. Case studies discussed in this chapter include topics such as the use of the internet to view pornography or Nazi websites, playing computer games, and who can access the internet at your institution.

Chapter 4 returns to the theme of the library as a place, emphasizing library spaces and programs. Many academic libraries sponsor programs or have rooms that groups can use. This is another area where written policies are important. For example, a policy can specify how rooms can be used and who can use them. These policies also need to include provisions that other library users are not unduly disturbed by the activities of a program or group.

Finally, Chapter 5 focuses on confidentiality and privacy. Jones reminds us that federal legislation, including the USA PATRIOT Act, affects library records. Many states also have statutes governing privacy of library records. She suggests that the library lead a campuswide privacy audit as well as a systematic study of all types of records and what happens to them. Case studies here cover topics such as the faculty wanting to know what students have checked out, the privacy of reference questions, and what to do if an FBI agent requests access to circulation records.

This book is a great overview of these issues in academic libraries. Jones provides some fascinating examples of tough situations. Each chapter features a good bibliography with some annotated citations. An appendix provides 40 pages of related documents from the ALA, including the Library Bill of Rights. This will be a helpful resource for any academic library administrator.

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