

The Librarian's Dilemma

KayLee Strahan

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA
kdscott2@illinois.edu

Delaney Bullinger

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA
db4@illinois.edu

Abstract

Librarians who work with incarcerated individuals face the dilemma of being asked to participate in a restrictive system while also adhering to universally accepted intellectual freedom standards. Prison librarians often face dual mistrust: the population they are serving distrusts them in their position of authority, while the prison hierarchy often dismisses their authority since prison administrators have ultimate power over prison library collection development and censorship decisions. In addition to this lack of control, librarians are often expected to simultaneously fulfill the duties of librarians in traditional spaces, by providing information and access to materials; act as a social worker, by providing

rehabilitation and reentry programs; and to work as a government employee, assisting staff in maintaining order and discipline within the institution. All of this frequently happens in conditions with limited budgets, chronic understaffing, insufficient space, and lack of support from prison administrators and the Department of Corrections. The mission of libraries is to provide free and open access to information, thereby creating a dissonance in prison library space. We address how librarians navigate questions of censorship in prisons and discuss whether intellectual freedom can exist in the current U.S. penal system.

Keywords: Prison librarianship, intellectual freedom, censorship, role conflict

The Librarian's Dilemma

KayLee Strahan and Delaney Bullinger
 School of Information Sciences, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

ILLINOIS
 School of Information Sciences

Introduction

Librarians who work with incarcerated individuals face a dilemma:

1. Participate in a restrictive system and simultaneously
2. Adhere to intellectual freedom standards.

We address how librarians navigate questions of censorship in prisons and discuss whether intellectual freedom can exist in the current U.S. penal system.

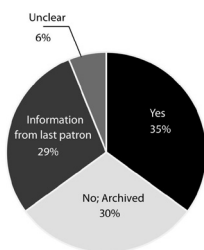


FIG. 3.—Circulation records deleted when item is returned

Suzanna Conrad, *Library Quarterly*

Prison Librarian's Role Conflict

State Expectations

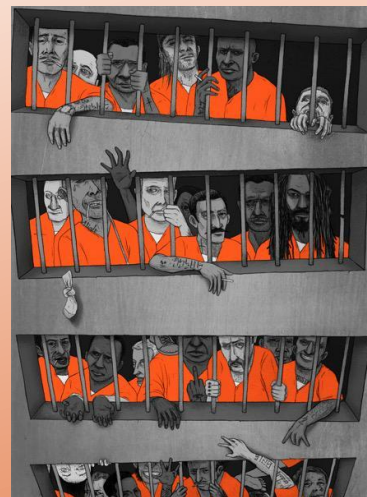
- Coordinate rehabilitation and reentry programs and services (Doyle 2013)
- Support the institution's educational mission (Conrad 2012)

Librarian

- Duties of public and school librarian (Arford 2013)
- Prisoner information needs - recreational, educational, vocational, literacy, privacy, & cultural
- Gatekeeper to information
- Legal resources

Enforcer

- Assist custody staff with maintaining order and discipline (Arford 2013)
- Must follow prison regulations and rules for collection development



Prison Industrial Complex - Jeff Gomez

Intellectual Freedom in Prison Libraries

Role of prison vs. library

- Prison as place of punishment for crimes committed
- Library minimizes feelings of isolation and loneliness of prison

Are incarcerated individuals forfeiting intellectual rights?

- Most scholars and administrators say yes
- "Legitimate penological interests"
- First and Eighth Amendment Rights

Attitudes Toward Prison Librarians

Seen by other prison staff as **outsider or civilian**

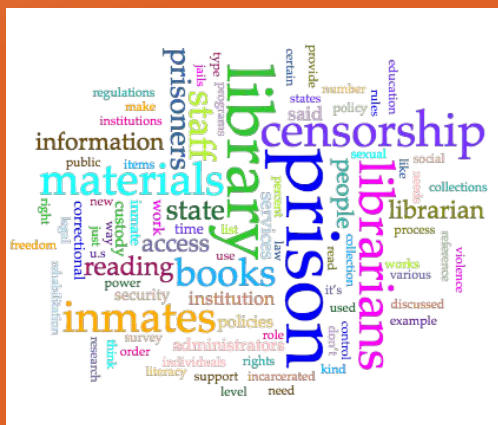
Seen by incarcerated individuals as **untrustworthy** or as a **functionary of the system**



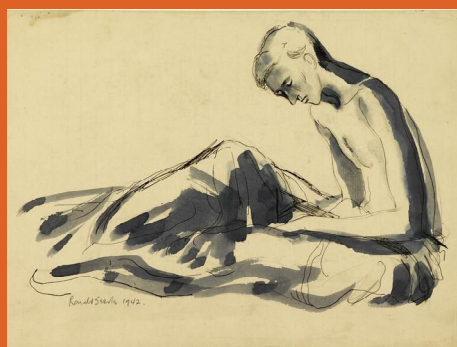
Presidio Modelo prison in Cuba - Wikimedia Commons

"When the prison gates slam behind an inmate, he does not lose his human quality; his mind does not become closed to ideas; his intellect does not cease to feed on a free and open interchange of opinions; his yearning for self-respect does not end; nor his quest for self-realization concluded."

Thurgood Marshall, Supreme Court Justice



Word cloud created using Voyant



Prisoner Reading, Singapore 1942 - Ronald Searle

Acknowledgments



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