

Collection Development and Meeting Room Questions that Can Be Answered with Policy “Tweaks”

Why don't you have this horribly racist/sexist/homophobic title?

Some racist, sexist, and homophobic titles you won't be able to avoid. Certain policy standards might help you avoid the most egregious offenders, though. Do not make it a habit to order books that are not by well-known or accredited authors who have been reviewed by other well-known or accredited authors or academics. This will give you a ready-made answer should someone ask why you do not have an obscure title that is particularly offensive to a specific group of people. Depending on the size of your library you may be able to limit book selections based on how many people have put any given title on hold. You could also consider including the ACLU or SPLC's definitions of “hate speech” within your policies, with the qualifier that you reserve the right to not order any content that falls under that purview.

Why do you have this horribly racist/sexist/homophobic title?

Unfortunately, some disgusting titles are written by well-known, well-reviewed, well-liked authors. To that end, they are liable to end up with a fair number of holds on them. Including a need for balance in your collection development policies and stipulating that the library collection is to be cultivated based on the needs and wants of the community, not on the needs or wants of the library, should give a librarian a good fall back should someone be bothered by a title promoting less than modern ideals.

Why do you have “X” display up?

Create policies surrounding the displays you put up and ensure these policies are as detailed as possible. Employees should know why displays are made, for what purpose, for what types of events, and what types of materials are or are not display acceptable. This is not just useful in answering questions about why certain things are on display, it is also useful in ensuring your employees know what kinds of displays they should be creating. Ensure display policies are applied evening throughout the building and that employees understand it. This will make it so that display questions can be answered just by reciting the portion of display policy that they conform with.

What about the children?!?

Make sure your policies regarding the use of materials address children's usage and children's viewing. If policies allow for children's cards, ensure they stipulate how these cards are acquired and what the parental responsibility for these cards is. If librarians are not to be held responsible for ensuring children do not read “inappropriate” material while in the building, make sure the policy states that. Including rules regarding unattended children and children in the adult collection areas is also a good way to stress that the library is not responsible for what children stumble upon if they are left unattended in the building.

Why do you have this title about “controversial topic” that I find horribly offensive?

Generally, the same policies that “allow” to both have racist/sexist/homophobic material or allow you to avoid having said material will also allow you have (or not have) material on a myriad of other “controversial” topics. Depending on the topics considered controversial by your library’s service area, it may be worthwhile to include something about ensuring a “balanced” collection.

Why is this title about “controversial topic that I find offensive” in the teen or child area?

MANY teen and children books being published today cover topics that adults think are inappropriate for the audience in question. Because of this, they will often complain not about the book being in the library but just about the book being in the collection it is in. Crafting cataloguing policies that stipulate that books must be located, at a minimum, in a space where they are easily and quickly accessible by the author’s intended audience is one way to ensure a ready answer to this complaint. Putting children’s books or teen’s books in the adult section would impede ready access by the author’s intended audience.

Why are you allowing “controversial group that offends me” to use the meeting rooms?

As long as the meeting room policies stipulate that all groups must have equal access to the meeting rooms, the patron is welcome to complain and the library is generally welcome to annoy them. If the patron cannot provide a legitimate reason beyond “they offend me” to deny the group in question access to meeting rooms, point them towards your policies as the explanation and move on.

Can my group of “hate group” use a meeting room for a gathering?

If you are abiding by the ACLU and SPLC’s definitions of hate speech when cultivating your collection, you are within your rights to abide by their definitions of hate group when granting meeting room access. Groups that espouse hate speech or are known hate groups can be kept out of the meeting rooms if you are able to use your policies to do so. Just make sure your policies, and your actions, are consistent. Either hate groups and hate speech are always allowed, or they are never allowed. Write your policies this way and then abide by them.

What do you mean we can’t use a meeting room anymore? We’re just “insert harmless group here!”

Make sure your meeting room policies include caveats and stipulations regarding group and individual behavior, and then make sure you document, document, document. A group should not be allowed to cause chaos in the library just because they are technically harmless. If your meeting room policies specify a “three strikes” rule, or something of that nature, you can point the organization to their disciplinary file and the library policies if they get fussy about losing the right to use library space.