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The Ethics and Practices of U.S. Prison Libraries

Many professions struggle with the diversion of theory from practice. This is true in the Library and Information Science (LIS) field, where the ethics and professional standards developed by its lead associations come into conflict with actual application. In LIS, there is perhaps no better example of this than in prison libraries. Here, especially in the United States, the ethical guidelines become incredibly difficult to enact completely. Currently, libraries and correctional institutions have conflicting goals inherent to their operation and as long as those goals remain unchanged, LIS professionals will be unable to fully uphold the ethical standards of intellectual freedom. I will cover the role of prison libraries, the standards that have been set by the American Library Association (ALA) and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), and the issues preventing their fulfillment. For clarity, this paper will focus on Federal and State adult prison libraries in the United States. Prison librarians have the incredibly difficult role of attempting to balance their professional standards with the rules of the institution in which they serve. It is not my purpose to belittle their services but rather explore the complex difficulties faced by them and their patrons.

According to the U.S. Department of Justice’s 2017 count, the prison population of the United States was around 1.5 million people. For every 100,000 residents, 440 of those are imprisoned in state or federal facilities (Bronson). Federal prison libraries are controlled by the Federal Bureau of Prisons. Each state is responsible for their own prisons and therefore their own prison libraries. Like any information institution, the purpose of libraries inside correctional institutions is to serve the information needs of its population. Inside prisons, this can manifest in a variety of ways. Libraries provide inmates a connection with the outside world by offering news and providing vital information needed to re-enter the community, such as housing and job prospects. Prison libraries can operate as both formal and independent learning centers. For instance, most correctional institutions offer educational and vocational enhancement programs and on-site libraries support their curriculum. Some correctional institutions offer treatment programs and libraries can supplement their goals with relevant materials. By law, inmates are entitled to basic legal reference materials, or “meaningful access to the courts,” as part of their 14th Amendment rights to equal protection. In early penitentiaries, inmates only had access to some books for the “moral and religious education of prisoners” (Lehmann). Now, prison libraries can offer recreational reading materials, a few leisure activities such as chess, and a place of retreat from the rest of the facility.

Inmates have established rights to Intellectual Freedom as long as there are no security risks. The American Library Association (ALA) defines Intellectual Freedom as the idea that individuals in a democratic society should able to “read, seek information, and speak freely”. This leads directly into the issues of privacy and censorship. Intellectually free individuals should be able to explore new knowledge without fear of surveillance or suppression. Library and Information Science, as a profession, values Intellectual Freedom as a basic right and frequently cites the United States’ First Amendment’s “freedom of expression” as well as the United Nation’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

First published in 1982 and most recently revised in 2010, ALA’s “Prisoners’ Right to Read: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights” covers “principles [that] should guide all library services…to people who are incarcerated or detained, regardless of citizenship status or conviction status”. Summarized, the statement covers censorship, collection development, and equitable access. It encourages librarians to develop a written collection policy, including procedures for acquiring materials and addressing challenges. Censorship is not justified for materials with “unpopular views” or “repugnant content” and the only items acceptable for restriction are those that present an “actual compelling and imminent risk to safety and security” as will be explained later. Librarians are encouraged to make efforts to develop a diverse range of materials and take into account their institution’s demographics, including non-English items and support to those with disabilities.

Similarly, IFLA’s 2001 *Guidelines for Library Services to Prisoners* offers itself as a “model guide” and a “practical tool” for the “planning, implementation, and evaluation of library services to prisoners” (3). These guidelines are broken up into categories: administration, access, physical facility & equipment, information technology, staff, budget, materials, programs, and marketing. Their philosophy echoes that of ALA’s in that an incarcerated person has not given up the right to learn and access information and restrictions should only be imposed if a risk is present. IFLA goes a step farther, however, by stating that “[p]rison libraries should emulate the public library model” while supporting educational and rehabilitation programs. These guidelines stress the necessity of qualified staff, quality library collection, and an “inviting” physical space. IFLA’s document mentions the concepts of information access as vital to a “free” society and as “a window to the outside world” (4) and these phrases are present in ALA’s statement too. Both these philosophies posit the prison library as an essential aspect of a prisoner’s potential rehabilitation and current well-being.

Yet, the prison library “does not function independently but operates within the larger correctional environment, whose mission and security policies often conflict with the library profession’s code of ethics and its belief in free access to information” (Lehmann). Despite the standards set by the profession, inmates in U.S. prisons often find their freedoms threatened. The Danville Correctional center in Illinois serves as a recent example. From November 2018 to January 2019, more than two hundred books were removed, censored, or banned from the college-in-prison program’s library. The removal of books was mandated by prison officials under the premise of security. It is acceptable by LIS standards to restrict titles if they pose a security risk such as escape how-tos or fighting style manuals. However, the materials removed from the collection included more such as violent and sexual items and ‘ethnic’ materials. The materials in question included themes of “critical pedagogy and learning, race, African American history, slave narratives, human struggle and suffering, the Holocaust, and gay culture and gender identity” (Harvey 18). These restrictions are unacceptable and infringe on the prisoner’s right to read materials from diverse backgrounds and viewpoints. Censorship is abhorrent to the LIS values in any form, but prison librarians report not to other LIS professionals, but to carceral authority.

What happened in Danville is not an isolated incident. Across the country, prison officials authorize the removal of objectionable materials or, more commonly, inhibit the collection process through arbitrary restrictions by limiting the type or catalogue of materials that can be purchased. Also common is the reduction of prison library budgets like in 2017 where “…the Illinois Department of Corrections spent a total of only $267 on books for educational programming across 28 correctional facilities” (Harvey 20). Short-term cuts don’t lead to long-term results, however. Improving and funding educational programs in prison reduces the rate of recidivism, improves employment rates after release, and promotes mental well-being while serving. There are obvious ties between education, income, and rates of incarceration. As Samantha Hines writes, “If education can potentially lift one out of a cycle of poverty, inequality, and crime, doesn’t it make sense to make education available to those who are caught in the cycle, to the benefit of all in society?” Why, then, if strengthening educational programs and the libraries that support those programs could benefit both inmates and the community, do prison officials and policymakers reduce prison library budgets and censor books on the human experience?

In society, prisons serve two purposes: advancing public safety by removing the individual from the community and promoting accountability through punishment and rehabilitation. Seemingly, these purposes have been de-prioritized in favor of control and revenue. This manifests within a system of power known as the “prison-industrial complex” (PIC), an interlocking collection of private and government interests that “promote the expansion of prisons and incarceration rates” (Mercadal). It is in the PIC’s best interests to keep the most vulnerable populations uneducated, impoverished, and incarcerated. The PIC relies on the dehumanization of its incarcerated population, at the expense of other values: “[i]ncarceration inherently limits the freedom, privacy and autonomy of individuals – three ingredients that are key to the provision of effective library services” (Finlay 122). While LIS values the individual and their rights to information and expression, prisons are responsible for suppressing those same values. It can be seen then that the goals of library services are incompatible with those of prisons.

Jeanie Austin and Melissa Villa-Nicholas discuss the link between LIS and PIC in their article, “Information Provision and the Carceral State: Race and Reference Beyond the Idea of the ‘Underserved’. They assert:

“Even when a well-stocked library exists within a carceral institution, it will be shaped by the ideological concerns of the institution and, due to censorship, spatial limitations, and other factors, there will be information that it lacks. Add to this the fact that prison (and at times, jail) populations are often quite large and access to library materials is limited by types of detainment within the institution (among many other factors) and it becomes obvious that even the most social justice-oriented library within a prison cannot provide frequently accessible, comprehensive, and humanizing information access” (243).

Despite the best efforts of well-intentioned library staff, the prison library will never be able to realize its full potential as long as the library is under authority of those with different values. The dehumanization of inmates is central to a prison’s power. It is the prison librarian’s job, then, to reduce the harm caused by these institutions of oppression. They must offer humanizing experiences and resources that pay respect to their patrons’ individual autonomy and freedoms.

Austin and Villa-Nichols go further by calling for an “intervention into the whiteness of the profession and… the profession’s role in replicating and furthering processes of criminalization” (233). The issue of race and gender in prison libraries should not be overlooked, especially since LIS is overwhelmingly White and female. Female inmates only make up 7% of the prison population. The imprisonment rate for Black females ages 18-19 are almost double that for White females. Black males of the same age are twelve times more likely to be imprisoned than White males of the same age. Overall, Black males are almost six times more likely to be imprisoned than their White counterparts (Bronson). Prison officials removing materials that speak to Black experiences is a deliberate attempt to Other and control a large percentage of the institution’s population: “In Texas, inmates can read Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* as well as two books by former Ku Klux Klan Grand Wizard David Duke. *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, however, is prohibited” (Harvey 18).

Not only are there “huge racial discrepancies between the prison population and the total population” (Hines) but also between prison librarians and those they serve. Anti-racist librarianship requires confronting and grappling with LIS’s history of whiteness and assimilation-pushing agendas. In the United States, libraries have historically worked to serve the State’s purposes, usually at the expense of minorities. LIS professionals and students must acknowledge this past but also admit the ways in which current librarianship discusses incarcerated persons. While researching this topic, I became uncomfortably aware of how the subject of race was often omitted or minimized. The censorship of materials, especially those about the Black experience, was never directly connected to racialized oppression. This, Austin and Villa-Nichols write, is part of how whiteness is normalized and made invisible by the profession. The language used in LIS publications discussing criminalization too often group incarcerated people by their race or crimes and further rob prisoners of their individuality.

They urge LIS to go further and actually critique the structures that support incarceration rather than make excuses for punitive logic or offer faith in the system. Furthermore, they assert that LIS must embrace critical theory, especially Critical Race Theory in their publications and academic teachings. The current research can serve to normalize or even support the Prison-Industrial Complex: “Research and literature on library services to people in jails and prisons often reiterate and further this dehumanization- positioning people who are incarcerated as Other, less than human, inferior, or in need of (white) salvation” (Austin 238). Current LIS students must be taught the racialized capitalism faced by their patrons and how that system affects more than just individuals. The influence of criminalization and inmate dehumanization spreads across families, friends, and communities. The issue of prison libraries does not affect just those who work and live inside the walls.

Additionally, I believe that the discussion of re-integration must be expanded. The concept of rehabilitation is racialized and risks furthering a White savior narrative. True desistance is complicated, but the criminal justice system and policymakers mostly concentrate on rates of recidivism. Recidivism, though, is a binary measure: “By over-relying on recidivism rates to gauge success, policymakers and system actors alike risk underappreciating change by individual defendants and undervaluing the criminal justice interventions that move people forward” (Klingele 774). This too, dehumanizes individuals who are incarcerated. More LIS research on desistance and humanistic approaches to re-integration into society should be explored and supported: “Regimes based upon opportunities for identity transformation and the developments of social bonds, and services built around the strengths of prisoners rather than their deficiencies, have much more in common with library philosophies than traditional prison concepts of control and punishment” (Finlay). LIS professionals should look for ways in which to collaborate with those who see criminality from an empathetic point of view and can help expand the literature and teachings surrounding prison librarianship.

Prison libraries should not be an extension of the prison itself. As shown, the ethical standards of the LIS profession would be compromised if that happened. Instead, libraries inside correctional institutions should take an active role in reducing harm and fulfilling the informational needs of their patrons. Prison librarians have the difficult job of balancing prison rules with their professional ethics. However, they are responsible for protecting the freedoms of their patrons as best they can and treating them as individuals with rights. To do this, LIS professionals must acknowledge the ways they might be contributing to a dehumanizing system. They must actively promote strong centralized policies that treat prisoners as people with rights, rather than another population to serve.

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