

Ethics Assignment

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The preamble to the ALA Code of Ethics states that its members belong to a profession “explicitly committed to intellectual freedom and the freedom of access to information” with a “special obligation to ensure the free flow of information and ideas...” The specific statements buttressing these principles go on to underline commitments to equitable access; accurate unbiased and courteous responses to all requests; intellectual freedom and non-censorship; and users’ rights to privacy and confidentiality with respect to resources used (ALA Code of Ethics). All of the aforementioned come into play in considering the first scenario - how to respond when faced with teenagers seeking help from a reference librarian on instructions for building a car bomb. As a Librarian, I would not call the police because it is not a law enforcement issue, and it would not be my place to question the teenagers’ motives - nefarious or otherwise. I would not violate their privacy by asking why they want the information. While I might consult with a supervisor to validate my own reasoning, I recognize that my values and my supervisors’ might differ and that there is often no one perfect solution to ethical dilemmas. Barnett cites separate experiments conducted in 1976 by Hauptman and in 1989 by Dowd in which each sampled 13 academic and public libraries to see whether reference librarians would help patrons requesting information on explosives and freebasing cocaine. In both experiments, the librarians did not refuse to supply the requested information. Interestingly, Hauptman concluded that “supplying such information implies an abrogation of professional, social, and human responsibility,” while Dowd affirmed the “necessity for the unfettered dissemination of information” (Barnett, 2014). I would choose the path of helping as much as possible because my training allows me to provide curated information that balances legitimate potential public safety concerns with the teenagers’ rights to intellectual freedom, privacy, and equitable access to information. Today, much information - some reputable and some downright dangerous - is readily available on the internet. As a librarian assisting these teenagers, I would see it as my

duty to include and discuss with them information on the dangers of making and handling explosives. This would ensure that the teenagers are served in a fair and non-discriminatory manner, and that their rights, and the rights of the public, are taken into consideration. In sum, the “individual rights” model and the “social justice” model would be the filters or normative ethical frameworks (Moran & Morner pg. 372), for guiding my decision.

Concerning the second scenario, as the director of a small academic library, I would accept the automation vendor’s offer of lunch at a national meeting on two conditions. First, that my library does not have a policy prohibiting accepting such invitations, and second, that I pay my own way. Conducting business on the sidelines of conferences can be a cost-effective way for directors and staff of small libraries to facilitate decision-making by engaging with major vendors over their products. This utilitarian approach (Moran & Morner, pg. 372) would be practical compared with the costs in time and money of engaging with vendors in scattered locations over a longer period. Still, it would be important to manage appearances of being “wined and dined” and perceptions that purchasing decisions are influenced by vendor hospitality. Thus, bringing along another director or friend who also pays their own way might be a great idea. As long as there is no individual conflict of interest, as long as I do not accept any free trips, free meals, or perquisites of any kind, and there are no personal or financial advantages that I would reap for myself, I see every reason to accept but to pay my own way. My small library would benefit.

The third scenario best illustrates how personal, professional, and institutional loyalties could collide. The first principle of the ALA Code of Conduct addresses equitable service and equitable access. The ALA is clear that the broad statements only provide a framework and do not dictate conduct over specific situations. Locking the restrooms and having patrons get a key to monitor restroom use might result in subjective decisions by library staff about who is worthy

of the key and who isn't, thereby violating the equal access principle. Where no laws are being broken, enlisting law enforcement would seem heavy handed. While encouraging patrons to establish a shelter for the homeless may be a worthy idea, it is unrelated to homeless patrons rights to public libraries' facilities. Homeless people and others visit libraries for a variety of reasons that include warmth, information, peace and quiet. From a social justice perspective, it is reasonable for libraries to post signs - as many do - to guide patrons in appropriate use of its facilities. Therefore, I would post signs discouraging inappropriate use of the library by any patron in the spirit of fair treatment for all. At the same time I would establish designated areas within the restrooms as clean up stations for use by the unhoused. In addition to this measure, I would ensure that housekeeping have more frequent presence and give more frequent attention to the restrooms to ensure that they are tidy and sanitary at all times and are comfortable for all patrons. Kim Leeder in her blog "Welcoming the Homeless into Libraries," cites a program called project H.O.M.E. at the Free Library of Philadelphia where formerly homeless people were hired as restroom attendants to monitor restrooms and keep them clean. According to Leeder, "the library watched their restroom problems dissolve, while needy individuals got back on track to supporting themselves". In sum, I would look to the utilitarian, and the social justice normative ethical frameworks (Moran and Morner pgs. 372, 373) to guide my decisions on this issue to bring about the greatest benefits and the least harm.

Increasing poverty and homelessness in the US "is one of the greatest challenges America's public libraries have ever faced" (Ayers). Ayers' perspective on homelessness in the United States goes forward from the civil war noting the sharp rise in the 1980s due to deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill, funding cuts for subsidized housing, breakdown in families, and the nation's illegal drug problems (pg.66). The official poverty rate in 2020 was 11.4 percent with 37.2 million people in poverty, approximately 3.3 million more than in 2019

(Shrier et al, Census Bureau). On a single night in January 2020, 580,466 people – about 18 of every 10,000 people in the United States – experienced homelessness across the United States. Homelessness has increased in the last four consecutive years after steady reductions from 2010 to 2016 (HUD, 2020). The American Library Association has a compassionate and concerned stance towards the poor and homeless as reflected in its task forces and policy statements on these issues. As an example, its policy statement on library service to the poor fully embraces the role of libraries in “enabling poor people to fully participate in a democratic society” (ALA, Library Services to the Poor). In addition, an ALA publication, the Librarian’s Guide to Homelessness: Advice for Managers and Leaders, provides an empathy-driven approach for solving problems, preventing conflict, and serving everyone (ALA Editions, 2018). With libraries on the front lines of the sweeping poverty and homelessness, and with libraries serving as lifelines, they are implementing creative ways to address the challenges as they arise. It is important to note that the challenges arise from library staff and patrons uncomfortable around signs of homelessness, and from the poor/homeless themselves. A director of an Illinois library noted that when patrons complain, “It’s usually not the presence of homeless people that bothers them, it’s the perception that they are dangerous” (Ruhlmann).

Examples of challenges and measures taken to relieve them include the following: Complaints from patrons have prompted some libraries (e.g. Chicago Public Library) to post policies prohibiting sleeping, carrying in multiple large bags, and bathing in the bathrooms. But homeless people move about with all of their earthly possessions and tend to stay awake at night to protect themselves and their belongings. The San Jose California Public Library practices open access through open dialogue and adopting policies implementable across their entire user base. For them, implementing a ban on sleeping is impractical because its university student patrons often nod off while studying for exams. This library trains its staff to address

problems without being too rigid about the rules. As an example, the response to a patron's oversized bag blocking the corridor is to ask if it can possibly be fitted under a table so that people can get by. Communities across the country have addressed the challenges in many different ways based on the magnitude of the problem and degree of community interest and support. In 2008 the San Francisco Public Library became the first in the nation to hire a full-time Psychiatric Social Worker and Health and Safety Advocates (HASAs) to promote services to the poor. It hosts a monthly fair where agencies set up booths offering resources and services to the homeless. Libraries in San José, Madison (Wisconsin), Philadelphia and Salt Lake City now have social workers in-house as well. Through partnerships with non-profit organizations, some libraries have staff dedicated to helping patrons find housing, jobs, and apply for social services. When the Madison, Wisconsin Public Library renovated its building, it took into consideration input from social service agencies to make the new space inviting and functional for all patrons, including the homeless, thus the new facility has workspaces for 10 different social agencies. An ongoing problem for libraries is the use of its bathrooms for bathing. To begin to alleviate this, the San Francisco Public Library has an initiative with a non-profit called Lava Mae that places mobile showers and washing stations near its libraries for the homeless to have private showers (Ruhlmann). Since 2013, Lava Mae's mission "to bring mobile showers and other services that promote well-being to people experiencing homelessness" has expanded across the country (Lava Mae website).

Not all library communities readily embrace the poor and homeless. Some communities see the poor and homeless and problem patrons. For example, the Joint Free Library of Morristown New Jersey (an affluent community) asked a homeless man, Richard Kreimer, to leave due to "bodily odors, and abusive outbursts". This prompted the American Civil Liberties Union to sue on his behalf (Ayers). Rulings in the case caused library communities to reflect on

the lenses through which they view poor and homeless patrons - - whether as 'problem patrons' or as patrons in need of help. Today, due to the heightened awareness of homelessness in communities big and small, the homeless are increasingly viewed as library patrons in need of help.

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