

RESTRICTED ACCESS TO LIBRARY MATERIALS

An Interpretation of the *Library Bill of Rights*

Libraries are a traditional forum for the open exchange of information. Attempts to restrict access to library materials violate the basic tenets of the *Library Bill of Rights*.

Some libraries place materials in a “closed shelf,” “locked case,” “adults only,” “restricted shelf,” or “high-demand” collection. Some libraries have applied filtering software to their Internet stations to prevent users from finding targeted categories of information, much of which is constitutionally protected. Some libraries block access to certain materials by placing other barriers between the user and those materials.

Because restricted materials often deal with controversial, unusual, or sensitive subjects, having to ask a librarian or circulation clerk for access to them may be embarrassing or inhibiting for patrons desiring the materials. Requiring a user to ask for materials may create a service barrier or pose a language-skills barrier. Even when a title is listed in the catalog with a reference to its restricted status, a barrier is placed between the patron and the publication. (See also “Labels and Rating Systems.”) Because restricted materials often feature information that some people consider objectionable, potential library users may be predisposed to think of the materials as objectionable and, therefore, be reluctant to ask for access to them.

Limiting access by relegating materials into physically or virtually restricted or segregated collections or restricting materials by creating age-related, linguistic, economic, psychological, or other barriers violates the *Library Bill of Rights*. However, some libraries have established restrictive policies to protect their materials from theft or mutilation, or because of statutory authority or institutional mandate. Such policies must be carefully formulated and administered to ensure they do not violate established principles of intellectual freedom. This caution is reflected in ALA policies, such as “Evaluating Library Collections,” “Free Access to Libraries for Minors,” “Preservation Policy,” and the ACRL “Code of Ethics for Special Collections Librarians.”

In keeping with the “Joint Statement on Access” of the American Library Association and Society of American Archivists, libraries should avoid accepting donor agreements or entering into contracts that impose permanent restrictions on special collections. As stated in the “Joint Statement,” it is the responsibility of libraries with such collections “to make available original research materials in its possession on equal terms of access.”

All proposals for restricted access collections should be carefully scrutinized to ensure that the purpose is not to suppress a viewpoint or to place a barrier between certain patrons and particular

content. A primary goal of the library profession is to facilitate access to all points of view on current and historical issues.

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