
Libraries and Gender ♂♀ Neutral / Inclusive Bathrooms: Case Studies on Promoting Information, Inclusivity and Access in Open Spaces

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Abstract:

Gender-neutral bathrooms, gender inclusive bathrooms, unisex bathrooms and other similar public restrooms have caused controversy in certain regions of the United States. This paper will explore selected cases of library promotion of gender neutral/inclusive and unisex bathrooms, and the learning opportunities and challenges presented in these contested spaces in the United States, and will also explore an international example. The paper utilizes several case studies to illustrate how libraries support welcoming, open spaces that encourage inclusivity, access and diversity in their communities. It will address questions such as: what kind of lessons can we learn from these cases in promoting gender neutral/inclusive bathrooms and how might other libraries consider these developments in their own institutions and in the profession at large.

Keywords: academic libraries, public libraries, LGBTQ, collaboration, and outreach

Introduction

Imagine you are in a world in which you have to consistently navigate a world where your basic rights are denied, because of your gender identity. One in which activities that other individuals may take for granted cuts to the very core of your identity. This is the world of the trans or non-binary individual (Divan, Cortez, Smelyanska, & Keatley, 2016). Whereas use of restrooms may be standard practice for cisgendered individuals, the same cannot be said of transgendered individuals. “According to a 2013 study by the Williams Institute, 70% of transgender people surveyed say they’ve experienced discrimination in restrooms, including being stared at, ridiculed, told to leave, or not allowed to use the facilities. Some reported experiencing physical violence or having the police called” (Cotterell, 2015). The

safety and dignity of this population is rarely considered in arguments about their use of restrooms. Rather, these arguments are often very conflicted and heated. They are often about the “space” rather than the users. Within this “space”, the transgendered person is transformed into a villainous voyeur, who lurks in the bathrooms poised to do harm, because of this policy. Those who espouse these views do not acknowledge that for transgendered persons safe spaces are paramount.

Libraries are often engaged in creating a welcoming and inclusive environment for all patrons. When libraries have gender neutral/inclusive or unisex bathrooms, they transform their spaces into safe ones, specifically for the transcommunity. The concept of creating and/or maintaining gender inclusive or gender neutral or unisex bathrooms is an important practice that underscores the importance of human rights, advocacy and inclusivity in libraries. This paper will present selected cases of how libraries are promoting gender neutral/inclusive and unisex bathrooms and the learning opportunities and challenges presented in these contested spaces. It draws from selected case studies and international perspectives to demonstrate and illustrate how libraries are supporting a welcoming, open space for inclusivity, access and diversity in their communities. In the reference section of this paper, there are also several resources that explore how recent discussions of gender neutral/inclusive bathrooms may be viewed in public spaces, such as libraries, and schools.

Case Study One: The Henry Madden Library at Fresno State

Fresno is located in the heart of California, in the Central Valley. It is a diverse county populated by many ethnic communities. California State University, Fresno (also known as Fresno State) is part of the California State University system (CSU), which is made up of 23 campuses across the state of California in the United States. Fresno State has over 21,000 undergraduate and 5,000 graduate students. It is a diverse campus with students from a variety of nationalities and ethnicities including Hispanics, Hmong, Cambodian, and Chinese heritage. Fresno State strives to “boldly educate and empower students for success” (Strategic Plan, 2016). To support this mission, the Henry Madden Library at Fresno State provides an important space for all to use - from tutoring services to technology support to services for students with disabilities, students find the library a place to seek out services and resources. The library also has a prayer/meditation room and a gender inclusive bathroom; it functions as one of the safe places on campus.

The Cross-Cultural and Gender Center (CCGC) at Fresno State plays an important role in supporting and fostering diversity, multiculturalism and inclusivity on campus. The center

“...exists to contribute significantly to the continued development of a safe and welcoming environment for the Fresno State community. We foster meaningful dialogue and activism that works to eliminate racism, sexism, heterosexism, and other forms of oppression. Our values are based on the feminist principles of equality, intersectionality, and human rights. The center is a community that works toward creating an atmosphere where students, faculty, staff and administrators are empowered and supported in their efforts to lead successful lives--academically, professionally, and personally” (Cross Cultural and Gender Center site, 2017).

CCGC is a major collaborator and advocate for many activities and programs across campus, particularly with the library’s diversity committee. For gender inclusive bathrooms, CCGC states,

“Fresno State strives to create and sustain a campus environment that supports and values all members of our community. One aspect of creating a supportive environment is providing safe, accessible, and convenient restroom facilities. Under California state law, students, staff, faculty, and campus guests may use the restroom facilities that correspond to their gender identity, or utilize restrooms that are designated all-gender or gender-inclusive” (Cross Cultural and Gender Center site, 2017).

CCGC provides a map of 26 gender inclusive bathrooms on campus found within the library and other academic buildings. The President’s Commission on Human Relations and Equity also promotes gender neutral bathrooms on campus in cooperation with CCGC.

The gender neutral bathroom is a space that is open to anyone who needs to use this facility, regardless of gender identity. During the Spring-Fall 2016 semesters, the bathrooms were opened around campus, after a two-year campaign by a group of students, who advocated for this effort to support transgender students and gender nonconforming students. The transformation of bathrooms turned all single use restrooms into restrooms for all gender use. The library’s bathroom has both multi-stall restrooms, and some single-stall. Some users addressed concerns about privacy, while the promotion for these bathrooms was fostered through campaign posters from CCGC.

This flier was prominently displayed in the library so that students, faculty and staff would become aware of the existence of this bathroom within the library. This was important from the library’s perspective as the space reflected the library’s mission of creating an inclusive environment that welcomed and respected all. Partnerships are very important in this enterprise, and thus, it is recommended that libraries to consider collaborating with their gender studies or diversity centers to promote these resources, spaces and services. This type of collaboration is an important approach to advocacy for the same cause and vision.

Case Study Two: Public Library

The discussion, debate, and administrative logistics surrounding the topic of gender neutral bathrooms in public libraries contrasts sharply with those in academic libraries. This divergence may be due to the difference between both types of libraries. Academic libraries have a more clearly defined community: students, faculty, and staff, all of whom have at least a baseline understanding of the culture, vision and mission of the institution under which they work and/or study. Intellectual freedom, the right to explore challenging ideas and respect those with whom one does not agree, is often supported within higher education.

Defining “community” in the context of public libraries, however, is often a more difficult undertaking. The size of the library plays a role in this situation. In small municipal library systems, the community is smaller, often more clearly delineated, but at the expense of having the benefit of diverse backgrounds and perspectives. Larger library systems, such as metropolitan systems or multi-branch countywide systems, benefit from connecting to a large swath of the population but may face challenges as result of branches representing several varied geographic areas and sub-communities.

The emphasis on community in the context of gender-neutral bathrooms is foundational because the governance of a public library, whether a single branch or a large system, is wholly dependent upon the members of the community. Community members serve on public libraries’ board of directors, volunteer their time and raise funds by serving on Friends

Groups and Foundations. Each of these entities has a great deal of influence on administrative decisions in public libraries.

The makeup of most public library boards of trustees/directors is influenced by a public library's local government, including mayors/county executives/other elected officials, who often assign members of the community to library boards. These individuals, in turn, often reflect the priorities and opinions of the elected official in power. If a library director wants to enact change within the library system they oversee, they are faced with the possibility of opposition from those who have the power to fire them. In Baker County, Oregon, a small conservative locale with a population of approximately 16,000 people, an action was proposed to the library board of directors to convert single-use bathrooms in 8 of the county system's libraries into gender neutral bathrooms with signage that reflected this change. The proposal was primarily apolitical, and highlighted the benefit of shortened wait times for the public, as well as increased convenience and security. The proposal was passed by the board unanimously on July 11, 2016 (Baker County Library District, 2016).

In other communities, the support of elected officials can bolster a library's move to gender-neutral bathrooms. The University Heights Branch of the San Diego Public Library was lauded as the first public facility in the city of San Diego to provide gender-neutral bathrooms. A city councilman in attendance at the unveiling of the restrooms shared his belief that they reflected the mission of the city (Garske, 2016). Ultimately, public libraries face greatest scrutiny as concerns gender-neutral bathrooms, because they are public-facing, open to every member of the community, and funded with tax dollars. The input of the public is often influential when it comes to facilities-related decisions in public libraries. A series of town-hall style meetings are scheduled for months during the planning and design phase of a new public library branch. The public is vocal and aware of changes their libraries make, and as a result, these libraries ought to implement a strong community-focused communication strategy when making the move to gender-neutral bathrooms.

Indeed, libraries ought to be aware of how technology may impact their communication strategy. Currently, emerging crowd-sourcing technology has placed the community in the driver's seat in defining public spaces. The REFUGE app exemplifies this movement, as the mobile-friendly website populates public spaces with user-submitted data about the status of public bathrooms. In taking a cursory glance at the site, especially when searching major cities like Chicago, New York, Baltimore, and San Diego, one will note that many public library locations are listed in its directory. For visitors in these cities, this app is invaluable. Regardless of signage, those within communities need to know where safe spaces exist, how to identify them for themselves, and how to gain access to specific directions to the safe bathrooms within a building (Molloy, 2014).

While the discussion about gender-neutral bathrooms often centers around signage, the site design of REFUGE reminds the user that facilities can have traditional binary-gender signage, but may still be regarded as safe for those of all gender expressions to use (Molloy, 2014). As politically charged as this topic may be, it is not possible for public libraries to remain neutral in this context. Failure to change signage or facilities' design implies as much of a statement as does concerted, progressive effort. Regardless of signage, the community will make these public spaces accessible to them in whichever way needed.

Case Study Three: University of Tennessee-Knoxville

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville has a poor record of supporting its LGBTQ population (“Princeton Review updates list of 20 most LGBT friendly, unfriendly colleges,” 2014). Yet, in 2015, the student senate determined it would take one step towards ensuring that it recognized the struggles of one of its most vulnerable populations. The student senate voted that summer to instigate the process of adding a gender-neutral bathroom to every single building on campus. The University of Tennessee supported this decision and instituted several gender-neutral bathrooms around campus, including the one in Hodges Library. Also in the libraries, the Pride Center on campus would find an advocate in one of the librarians, Donna Braquet. Donna served as director for the center and provided tireless support and training for LGBT students on campus.

In Fall 2015, with her help, the Office of Diversity and Inclusion published a guide that would assist those who wanted to address others by gender-neutral pronouns. The publication was revealed to FOX news and gained national attention and heated debate around campus. The result of this was the University of Tennessee’s administration removing the publication and revoking the web-publishing rights of the Office of Diversity and Inclusion, and Donna also came under greater scrutiny. Another incident later in the year garnered the attention of the legislature and led to a very tense time on campus. When the Office of Diversity was defunded in the summer of 2016, Donna’s role as an advocate was severely diminished and she lost her directorship of the Pride Center. The Pride Center would then have to defend itself, following the passage of public chapter 1066.

It is within this context that the gender-neutral restrooms were rebranded family restrooms. Indeed, if one were to search google for gender neutral restrooms at the University of Tennessee Knoxville, the linked page would be titled gender neutral and family restrooms, but on the page itself, it would be listed as family restrooms and locations would be provided. Today, gender-neutral restrooms are a potential target in Tennessee (Tennessee lawmakers re-introduce transgender bathroom bill, 2017). Indeed, there are several bills that may have negative results for those who identify as LGBT within the state. Family restrooms are gender less by their very nature, and guard against the idea that a person born in one gender can only use the bathroom that is designated with the gender listed on their birth certificate.

International Perspective from Mexico

In spite of measures taken in Mexico City to protect some of the transgender population, there are limited protections or services throughout the rest of the country for them. Juchitán de Zaragoza, municipality of the state of Oaxaca, serves as one important example of a place where gender is not binary. There, the existence of a third gender is a normal part of daily life. Within this community, people who were born with a man's body but do not identify themselves as male or female (so-called "muxes") seem to be divided about whether a third bathroom is the solution: some believe it would eliminate tensions, others believe it would strengthen divisions. The debate on trans-bathrooms is still very precarious throughout the country, even in places where the existence of trans-people is normalized. Indeed, other areas are given greater importance, primarily to provide relief from the constant threat of violence they endure.

Conclusion

These examples provide learning opportunities for those considering how to be more inclusive and how to provide safe spaces for their patrons, even in challenging contexts. It is important to note one's institution and context may impact the ability to provide these spaces. In this context, academic institutions may have the advantage as they often have more leverage to create these spaces.

This leverage is a result of their perceived traditional stance on human rights advocacy, which may or may not be bolstered by obligations from federal or state governments. Regardless of any advantage, any library can play the role of collaborator to partner with community or campus groups to promote resources, services and spaces for the transcommunity. It's not about the bathroom; for the transcommunity, it's about so much more.

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