Inclusion and Empathy Are Not Enough: Cultivating Student Belonging in the Academic Library Through Compassion

Emily Reed

abstract: This article explores the challenges, complexities, and contradictions of promising complete inclusiveness for all students and advocates for academic libraries to pursue student belonging. A sense of belonging is not only memorable for the student but impactful, as it results in closer social connections and higher rates of persistence. While an organizational foundation of inclusivity is inarguably essential, it must be coupled with individualized social support from public-facing employees. Tolerance, empathy, and compassion are compared as social support approaches for cultivating belonging, and tough situations that threaten students' sense of belonging are examined. Academic libraries should not settle for an end-goal of inclusivity but instead seek to create an environment that abounds with opportunities for students to experience a profound sense of belonging as they grow and learn.

Introduction

Universities are some of the most diversely concentrated environments in the United States. Students represent many different facets of diversity including citizenship, race, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, physical ability, first generation status, and political ideology, among others. As students interact, some may be open about their own identities and display curiosity to learn about their peers' backgrounds and beliefs while others may feel offended, invaded, threatened, defensive, or ashamed. Leaders in higher education have increasingly sought educational and procedural approaches that holistically consider the diverse backgrounds of their students to break down barriers and capitalize on student strengths.

Academic libraries serve many purposes within higher education by offering spaces, resources, services, and expertise. They often serve as an epicenter for students to congregate in groups to socialize or study and can be considered a "contact zone" where individuals with different cultural and linguistic norms often interact.[1] As a result, many

academic libraries have implemented best practices for inclusiveness for their resources, services, programs, and spaces to best serve their diverse student bodies.

I have noticed that establishing inclusive practices is not a foolproof way of ensuring that students feel that they belong in their library. Imagine the following scenario: a first-year international student walks into her academic library for the very first time. She wanders around the library somewhat aimlessly, exploring the various spaces in the library and learning what kinds of resources the library has to offer. She comes across a display of books with a sign: "Learn about the Middle East." She is excited to see this display! She misses her family and friends back in Iran and thinks that maybe reading a book about her home country would help relieve some of her homesickness. Looking more closely at the books though, she realizes that nearly all of them are either academic books focused on international relations and politics in the Middle East or are popular fiction titles that focus on the hardships of life for people who live in the region. She does not find any books that she thinks would help her feel better and leaves the library discouraged, wondering why there are not any books that focus on the natural beauty, Persian culture, and imaginative stories of her homeland.

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In this case, the library attempted to highlight their collection as inclusive by spotlighting books that focus on a particular region. However, the library failed to recognize that in their attempt to educate college students about the Middle East, they represented an entire region as an undesirable place to live and only of value for political reasons. Not considered was that international students from the region may feel that the chosen books are not representative of life there.

I have spent a lot of time reflecting not only on what it means to be an inclusive library, but also about the lengths, limitations, and misconceptions of inclusivity. I am the liaison librarian for four distinctive populations on my campus: the School of Public Affairs, international students from all around the world, first-year students enrolled in the general education composition course, and the PRIDE Club (a club that supports LGBTQ+ students to express themselves and find community). At times, I have met with students who see the evidence of my work supporting each population, and upon noticing, they become perceptibly uncomfortable. When I meet with international students in my office, sometimes they stare at the LGBTQ+ positive messages they can see such as stickers, handouts, and bookmarks found on my desk and whiteboard. At other times, I meet with students in my office who ask for assistance researching positive impacts of banning transgender athletes in college sports, or benefits of policies that prohibit government employees from wearing religious head coverings.

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At times, I feel like my various responsibilities to my liaison populations are at odds with each other, pulling me in opposite directions. Are all students capable of feeling that they belong in the library, even when the library demonstrates inclusivity to other people who might seek to exclude them? Is "inclusion for all" the most optimal goal, or is there a better one? This article will explore these questions by comparing approaches of tolerance, empathy, and compassion, and will ultimately advocate that inclusiveness alone is not enough but cultivating an environment where each and every student has an opportunity to experience a powerful sense of belonging is a superior goal.

Inclusivity Versus Belonging

Before proceeding too far, I want to acknowledge my positionality, interest, and experience with this topic. I am a reference and instruction librarian who serves multiple distinctive populations on the Penn State Harrisburg campus. I am a librarian who classifies into many dominant demographic categories for librarians: I am a United States citizen, white, female, straight, cisgender, able-bodied, neurotypical woman. I was raised in a middle-class, Protestant, continuing-generation home in a suburb of a small city. I think it is important to identify these various facets of my identity in this article to acknowledge the privilege my background has afforded me as well as recognize that I do not share demographic characteristics with many of the students whom I serve. I am acutely aware of this, and I am always seeking effective and impactful ways to connect with students who have different backgrounds, identities, and beliefs than me.

Inclusivity: Essential, But Not Enough

In recent years, Penn State University added belonging to its organizational culture values of diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA). Many other universities and academic libraries have a similar emphasis on belonging. But what precisely is belonging, and how does it differ from inclusivity? And while institutions of higher education and libraries can focus on efforts that are equitable and inclusive of all students, does that mean that all students will feel an equal sense of belonging, or a sense of belonging at equal rates?

Inclusion is defined by the American Library Association (ALA) as "an environment in which all individuals are treated fairly and respectfully; are valued for their distinctive skills, experiences, and perspectives; have equal access to resources and opportunities; and can contribute fully to the organization's success."[2] While inclusion is a fundamental academic library value, inclusive practices, processes, and policies do not automatically result in a sense of belonging. Inclusion successfully removes barriers and welcomes differences; it is possible that some students will never recognize the efforts of their library to be inclusive.

It is up to each library to determine how it will demonstrate inclusiveness. Inclusivity is most effectively fostered by those in a position of authority, such as library leaders who adopt and apply strategic plans, policies, and guidelines, or individual librarians teaching students. Intentionally creating a climate of inclusivity means that everyone has equitable access to library resources and services while student differences do not

lead to exclusion. Inclusive environments are successfully achieved by identifying distinctions that make particular populations more vulnerable to barriers that impede access or use of spaces, resources, or services, and implementing changes that reduce or eliminate those barriers.

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Inclusive library practices and policies have been well documented in library literature, including developing library services targeting teens and young adults, hiring diverse employees, designing inclusive programs focused on diversity, exhibiting cultural humility, and updating subject headings to be inclusive.[3] Teaching librarians have also proposed strategies for establishing an inclusive library instruction experience for students through storytelling and strengths-based teaching approaches such as culturally responsive teaching and employing the principles described in the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework.[4] Librarians who are able to successfully establish a foundation of trust during library instruction and want an opportunity to engage more deeply with students may also find teaching methods designed for engaging students in constructive dialogue to be a particularly impactful and inclusive learning experience.[5] Constructive dialogue emphasizes "brave spaces" over "safe spaces" by promoting full engagement in a discussion while remaining open to new and different opinions, allowing individuals of opposing viewpoints to freely express their opinions while suspending judgment. Ideally, this would mean that even views that some might find distasteful could be shared and discussed to build mutual understanding.[6]

Working toward inclusivity results in reduced barriers, challenges, and injustices, but it does not guarantee that students will feel emotionally connected to their academic library. Alternatively, a sense of belonging results from positive emotions, and those emotions cannot be forced. But first laying a foundation of inclusivity through policies and common practices cultivates a space where students are far more likely to experience a sense of belonging.

Belonging: Impactful for Students

The concept of belonging initially originates from psychology. Belonging is the third of five needs in Abraham Maslow's renowned hierarchy of needs. Physiological needs and safety needs are considered more fundamental, and esteem and self-actualization develop only after the needs for physiological needs, safety, and belonging are adequately met.[7] Maslow describes belonging as "a hunger for affectionate relations with people in general, namely, for a place in his group."[8] In the field of education, school belonging is described as the social component within the school environment contributing to students' academic motivation. According to Carol Goodenow and Kathleen Grady, social aspects that constitute belonging include anything that makes the student "feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others – especially other teachers and

other adults in the school environment."[9] Regarding higher education, Vincent Tinto argues that it is a student's "integration into the academic and social systems of the college that most directly relates to his continuance in that college."[10] In Tinto's college dropout model, he argues that students need socialization through informal peer groups, extracurricular activities, and interactions with faculty and personnel, with absence of any of these facets leading to higher rates of dropout.[11] This claim has continued to garner support in more recent studies. Maithreyi Gopalan and Shannon Brady found that racial and ethnic minority students as well as first-generation students experience lower rates of belonging at four-year colleges than white and continuing-generation students, and that belonging positively impacts persistence and engagement with campus services.[12]

Academic libraries are perfectly situated to coordinate and offer opportunities for socialization that can lead to a sense of belonging. Many libraries are already encouraging peer socialization through opportunities such as dedicated spaces for group study as well as engagement activities in collaboration with other campus units.[13] Interestingly, Goodenow and Grady's school belonging research and Tinto's college dropout model both specify that social support from teachers, faculty, and personnel are essential components for students to experience belonging in their educational environment, not just social interaction with peers. Research into academic libraries becoming social spaces

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for students is abundant, and these efforts are worthwhile, but this article will primarily focus on students' social relationships and interactions with library employees as a mechanism for creating an environment where belonging can be achieved.

The Path to Belonging: Tolerance, Empathy, or Compassion?

One way that many academic libraries promote inclusivity is cultivating an environment where all students want to spend time, whether for an academic purpose such as finding resources, getting assistance, or studying, or out of a desire to find a safe space to just exist in for a while. In their academic library, students are likely to interact with library resources and promotional materials for events. Libraries offer support for diverse viewpoints which can be represented in the library's collection and its programming with the hope that all students can find their own perspective represented among the others, making them feel seen and valued. Rudine Sims Bishop describes the power of stories to validate one's personal identity and experiences by serving as mirrors, or to illuminate others' journeys by

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serving as sliding glass doors.[14] Library collections, programs, employees, and students can all serve as mirrors or doors as well.

Sometimes, students focus on viewpoints found in the library that oppose their own and experience an initial negative emotional reaction leading them to feel that they do not belong, and they do not persevere to look any further for mirrors that would assure them of their value and acceptance. While libraries encourage students to welcome both mirrors and doors they find in the library, some students are intimidated, uncomfortable, or even threatened by what they can see through those doors.

How can the library persuade students in these situations that they too have a place in the library, that they belong, and to be brave when faced with sources symbolizing doors? And how can library employees effectively engage with students who represent doors in their values, experiences, and beliefs? Tolerance, empathy, and compassion have all been proposed by others as practical methods for library employees to engage with students, not just as a path to inclusiveness, but as a path to belonging.

Tolerance

One approach for interacting with others who have conflicting perspectives is tolerance. Employing tolerance involves taking note of negative feelings and working toward a compromise.[15] This implies that someone can be tolerant while still holding prejudice.[16] At many libraries, library leadership would prefer their employees and students not to be prejudiced against others, so tolerance does not go far enough as an institutional approach for engaging with others who hold conflicting beliefs or values[17]

Tolerance can also be described as an intentional choice to not interfere with behaviors or activities with which the tolerator disagrees.[18] This definition resonates as something that libraries focused on maintaining neutrality might cling to. It provides a rationale for libraries to remain stagnant in their values and actions, to not challenge the status quo rather than actively intervening when faced with unjust practices.

Recalling the scenario I described earlier, let's examine what an approach of tolerance might look like if the international student informed a library employee of her concerns about the Middle East book display. Using a tolerance-based approach, the employee hears what she had to say but does not try to understand her point of view more deeply. They might communicate the rationale for selecting the books, perhaps noting that they had students in mind who are not knowledgeable about the Middle East, and indicate that most of these books were purchased to support academic programs, not teach comprehensively about the region's cultures. There is not an attempt to empathize with the student or find a solution since the employee is not convinced there is a legitimate issue. The student would likely not feel respected or accepted in the library after this interaction.

Empathy

Another approach that has been examined closely in library literature is empathy. It is notable that library and education scholars do not operate on a universally agreed upon definition of empathy.[19] One foundational definition of empathy originates in Martin Buber's 1923 *I and Thou* (translated from German, *Ich und Du*).[20] Buber was an early 20th

century philosopher and political activist with wide-ranging research interests including education, social philosophy, and politics.[21] Buber describes empathy as requiring an individual to fully give up their perspective in order to understand someone else's perspective. Comparing Buber's idea of empathy with others, Manuel Camassa delves into the etymology of the word which is Greek in origin and best translates to "feeling inside" or "feeling into."[22] JJ Pionke and Rebecca Graham conducted a scoping review of empathy and similar practices in LIS and defined empathy as an emotional connection between individuals that leads to a mutual understanding.[23] Some scholars differentiate cognitive empathy (or perspective-taking), which is based on a shared understanding, from affective empathy wherein individuals share an emotional connection.[24] Others say that empathy must be a cognitive and affective experience simultaneously.[25]

Common empathy-based approaches include practicing perspective-taking and reflective thinking.[26] It is completely fair if library employees feel that being required to display empathy at work could be highly problematic since it requires emotional energy and potentially goes as far as giving up their perspective and values in the process. This would be highly challenging to individuals' personal integrity, and empathy can lead to employee burnout.[27] One study found that there are high levels of empathy-based stress among school personnel and educators resulting in commonly occurring symptoms including anxiety, trouble sleeping, de-

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creased productivity and motivation, withdrawal from colleagues, behavioral changes, and spiritual uncertainty, among others.[28] Empathy can lead to empathic distress, which is when the others' suffering begins to feel so uncomfortable to an individual that they decide to preemptively withdraw from situations that would result in an empathetic experience in order to avoid excessive feelings of negativity.[29]

Let's say our international student approaches a different library employee, and this time is met with empathy. The library employee listens to the student, trying to see her perspective. The employee imagines what it would feel like to be alone in another country and see a book display about the US if the books chosen were only about the American government and a few bestsellers, maybe all from the true crime genre. The employee validates the student's feelings and thanks her for sharing her concerns. The employee sincerely feels bad that the library has caused this student distress. The student leaves the library feeling a little better, having been listened to and understood, and the employee continues to dwell on the interaction for the rest of the day, wondering how they could have avoided this situation.

Compassion

While empathy involves a shared understanding or emotional connection between individuals, compassion involves an additional action in response to suffering, concern,

or distress.[30] Responding with compassion largely avoids empathy's burnout effect and empathic distress.[31] The qualifier that compassion requires action is common in the field of healthcare, where compassion is defined as, "the recognition, understanding, and emotional resonance with another's concerns, distress, pain or suffering, coupled with relational action to ameliorate these states."[32] Demonstrating compassion to students in need has the potential to generate a true sense of belonging for students since it results in feelings of acceptance and being supported.[33] When a library employee recognizes a student's need and works to meet it, they convey that the student is valued, is deserving of support, and that their needs are respected. And when the student's need is successfully met, they usually experience positive feelings of relief and fulfillment.

Public-facing employees are usually best positioned to respond with compassion. This leads to the question of how far library employees should be expected to go to show compassion. Each employee will need to personally decide on their own limit. Exhibiting compassion often means taking extra steps to satisfactorily alleviate distress or concern, and this can take time or become complicated. Some solutions that may be simple for one person to implement may be too demanding for another given differing strengths and contexts. Unlike empathy, library employees should rest assured that to be inclusive or compassionate does not mean giving up their own values and belief system. Employees can retain these aspects of their beliefs while connecting emotionally with students and taking steps to reduce any distress they may have through compassionate measures.

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This time, our international student tells a compassionate library employee about her concerns with the book display. The employee listens closely to the student's concerns, humbly asks clarifying questions to fully understand, and then repeats back to the student their understanding of the student's concern to verify. The employee may experience negative feelings such sorrow or anxiety considering how the library book display made the student feel. Then they decide if there is a solution that not only addresses the student's concerns but is also aligned with the goals of the display. One solution could be to ask the student if she has specific titles in mind that could add to the quality of the display. Or, the employee could research books to be included in the future. Another could be to amend the name of the display to something more fitting. And there are other solutions! The compassionate library employee asks the student for her feedback about their proposed solution and then works to deliver the solution. While the library employee has more work ahead of them, the display will be greatly improved. Additionally, the student in this scenario leaves the library feeling respected, supported, and valued.

Compassion in Action

There are frequent opportunities for public-facing employees to demonstrate compassion in an academic library setting. Any employee who notices a student's "concerns,

distress, pain, or suffering" can choose to be compassionate.[34] A student may come to the information desk with a relatively minor concern. Other students may be experiencing extreme distress, pain, or suffering. Compassion can be successfully utilized in a wide range of situations in which a student is in need.

Reference interactions are the most common situation for students to interact individually with a library employee, whether at the public reference desk or in an individual consultation in a private space. In recent years, ALA's Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) has recognized the role that interpersonal relationships play during reference interactions. In the 2023 update to the Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers, RUSA acknowledges that many reference interactions are collaborative learning experiences requiring the library worker to display "excellent interpersonal skills."[35] Even more commanding, library workers are called upon to, "enter relationships with users that include communication, trust-building, mutual understanding, and intellectual empathy."[36]

In addition to RUSA, many scholars have also emphasized that empathy is a key part of reference interactions.[37] Given the nature of reference work, most librarians who seem empathetic during reference interactions actually engage in compassion. Both empathy and compassion involve forming an authentic connection between the librarian and the patron—emotional and/or cognitive—with compassion going one step further and acting to address the other party's distress. Since reference work is about assisting patrons and is by nature action-oriented, librarians who connect with a patron and successfully assist them demonstrate compassion by addressing a need. Compassion does not require that the librarian experience emotional distress themselves.

Joan Tronto developed a four-step model of care that someone in a caregiving position can employ to effectively show care for someone in distress. This model can be applied to many situations in the library, from reference transactions to other public situations:

1.   "Care about" or attentiveness—the caregiver should recognize that care is needed and that action should be taken.

2.   "Take care of" or responsibility—the caregiver should identify how the need can be met.

3.   "Care-giving" or competency—the caregiver does the work needed to be done to meet the need.

4.   "Care-receiving" or responsiveness—the caregiver assesses if the need has been met.[38]

What is noteworthy about Tronto's model is the fourth step, the caregiver should assess whether the caregiving act was acceptable, effective, or complete by observing the person cared for. Caring for someone by intervening and responding to a need is not enough; the caregiver should also assess whether the need has been fully met or if there is more to be done. Nel Noddings brought ethics of care to education and added that the caregiver should be attentive to expressed needs, not assumed needs.[39] In an academic library, this means that library employees should be receptive to the needs that students express and not make assumptions. The library must have previously established a foundation of inclusiveness for students to feel enough trust in the library to speak up about their needs.

One approach for assisting others with compassion during reference interviews is through "humble inquiry." Humble inquiry involves rejecting the urge to "tell" someone a solution and instead, be curious and ask open-ended questions with a gentle manner to elicit key information while creating a positive social connection, reducing power dynamics, and understanding the other's perspective.[40] Humble inquiry can be a useful framework, particularly during research consultations or other public-facing reference work.[41] By showing interest, asking open-ended questions, practicing close listening, and valuing the student as an equal partner during a consultation, the librarian can better ascertain the true nature of the need and be better situated to assist. Responding compassionately by showing interest, listening attentively, and demonstrating care while assisting with the question generates an environment in which students of any identity can feel a sense of belonging.[42]

Though reference interactions are likely the most robust form of engagement students may have with a library employee, any public-facing employee who sees a student in need can demonstrate compassion. Acts of compassion can be big or small, just as needs and concerns can be big or small. How compassion is offered is also dependent on the context of the situation, the space, and the employee's own strengths. For example, a library employee walks by a study carrel and sees a student sitting alone crying. There are several ways they could respond compassionately. The employee may ask the student how they are doing or if they want to talk. They may offer a tissue without even asking. They may notify another employee and ask for assistance. The chosen course will depend on whether the employee knows the student, if the employee is a student themselves, their surroundings, what they are able to offer such as a private office to talk, or if there is a tissue box nearby. The employee should be careful not to cause further distress, so they should be mindful of maintaining the student's privacy and dignity in this situation as much as possible by speaking directly to the student and drawing as little attention from others as possible. The employee may or may not be able to assist the student with the root cause of their distress. But acknowledging the student's emotions and situation can be an act of compassion that the student is likely to remember, along with the positive emotions associated with the realization that there is a library employee who cared for them in their time of need.

Applying Compassion in Tough Situations

Considering that a library can encourage a sense of belonging through individual acts of compassion, let's examine some complicated but common situations that threaten belonging and assess how choosing to act with compassion might affect both students and employees.

Free Speech in the Library

One threat to belonging that has generated much discussion is the academic library's role in protecting inclusiveness, considering the right to free speech and free expression. Individuals who exercise their right to free speech and expression in the library can negatively affect other students' physical, mental, and emotional safety in a space

that is often portrayed as safe. How should library employes respond when someone is conveying a viewpoint or using language that is discernibly hurtful to others? What is the moral responsibility of the library to protect students from psychological or emotional harm, and where are the bounds?

Considering that academic libraries are a contact zone, what one student might consider to be a religious belief might be considered a hateful or discriminatory idea by another. A remark regarding gender expression or sexuality may in one context be intended as hurtful while in another be part of a deep, good faith discussion. A private conversation between two close friends who share the same religious beliefs about identity representation may be overheard by others who are offended and hurt. The academic library is supposed to be a place where both intellectual freedom and privacy are protected, encouraging everyone, no matter their viewpoints, to use the space, re-sources, and services to further their intellectual pursuits. But how does this balance with many libraries' goals of creating a space that is welcoming for everyone, when some of the people in the physical space may not have the same goal?

Libraries are empowered and encouraged to adopt policies that prohibit disrup-tive behavior, protecting the safety of their patrons. ALA provides guidance for library policy regarding hateful conduct.[43] Academic libraries should review institutional poli-cies regarding hateful conduct, behavior disruptions, privacy, and safety, and advocate for changes in institutional policy where needed. An institution's general counsel should also be consulted to ensure that policies are within federal and

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state regulations. Library leadership should proactively offer training opportunities for public-facing employees regarding library policies dealing with hateful conduct, disruptive behavior, and safety.

I can recall several instances when I have overheard students make statements that were potentially harmful to others nearby. When these situations arise, these are the questions I ask myself before acting:

- Is anyone in immediate physical danger?

- Is this a conversation that the students would consider to be private? Is it occurring in a study room or an open area of the library? What is the volume of the conversation?

- Are there any bystanders that are likely overhearing this conversation?

- Do I have an adequate understanding of the conversation's context? Am I overhearing the middle of a conversation? Could the students be referencing a viewpoint of a source or other person?

- Does anyone seem visibly distressed by the conversation?

- Do I believe there are unequal power dynamics at play?

- Would intervening likely cause a larger problem?

- Does this situation merit immediate intervention, or should I wait, continue observing, and then reassess?

- Is there a supervisor or colleague available I can speak with to get a second opinion about this situation?

- What are the relevant policies that I can use to guide my decision?

It is not always possible to definitively answer each question. Sometimes, I have had to exercise my best judgment, aware that I do not have a full understanding of the situation. Sometimes, expressed viewpoints that seem distasteful may have good reason to be tolerated in the library. There are many situations in which students may be discussing sensitive and complex topics, discovering the nuances of different worldviews for themselves. And that kind of cooperative learning experience should be encouraged in the intellectual safety of the library.

When it is not clear to me after reflecting on the questions whether an intervention is warranted or not, I try to identify the most compassionate path forward. If I believe that someone is in distress or suffering, then I intervene, making sure to follow policy. Intervening can take many forms. Sometimes establishing a physical presence nearby is enough to either stop or decrease the volume of a disruptive conversation. Other times, I will try to make discreet eye contact with the student I perceive to potentially be in distress and try to ascertain if they would welcome my intervention. In situations where I believe that my intervention could cause more unwarranted distress, I wait, continue to observe, then reassess. Some students can address unwelcome comments directly and comfortably and may benefit from the opportunity to exercise their constructive dialogue skills. In some instances, direct and immediate intervention is necessary. In cases where behavior or language is disruptive or otherwise violates policy, the compassionate thing to do is address the situation before it escalates further. Students should be made aware of policies and potential consequences of not changing their behavior.

Library leaders should be proactive in establishing policies and practices and communicating them, periodically review policies, offer or require bystander training for public-facing employees, and have additional written documentation and guidance to support them in unusual situations. While disruptive behavior is often against policy and should be addressed, college is a wonderful place for students to ask questions, explore differences, and get curious! It is imperative that libraries promote an environment of open exploration that allows space for tough questions to be examined publicly. The library is a space for all students who sincerely desire to learn.

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Clashing Student Values: Religion and Identity

Another threat to belonging that I often think about relates to conflicts between religious beliefs and personal identities. I often serve as international students' first point of contact for the library and their research questions. In this capacity, I have taught many international students in one-shot library instruction sessions and have met with international students individually for consultations. I know that many of our international students are diverse in their cultural backgrounds, faiths, and personal viewpoints. For example, a fair number of our students grew up in countries where homosexuality is criminalized, and they may have moral or religious opposition to accepting LGBTQ+ individuals in society. There are also many people who grew up in the US who do not believe that homosexuality should be accepted by society, with higher rates discouraging homosexuality among people affiliated with a religion, particularly Protestant Christian.[44] I wonder what students who believe that homosexuality should not be accepted by society think when they see merch in my office that designates my office as a safe space for LGBTQ+ students, displaying my support for the PRIDE Club. By having logos supporting the LGBTQ+ campus community publicly visible in my office on stickers and in my email signature, do students with certain religious views see me as someone opposed to their own ideals and values? Do they consciously distance themselves from my services, putting a ceiling on the level of assistance they are willing to receive? Can I be fully inclusive and a visible ally to both student populations simultaneously? If not, how should I decide what is the best way to support all students?

Seeing LGBTQ+ merch in the library, such as pride flags and stickers, is divisive among college students. Some students feel that a lack of visible support promotes the message that the library is neutral and does not favor students with certain identities over others. Other students, however, feel that a library that lacks visible support for the LGBTQ+ population makes queer students more anxious and less likely to engage with library employees about their questions.[45] Should the library choose to not show visible support for any specific populations?

These questions indicate why inclusion alone is not enough. It is not possible for all students to equally feel that their viewpoints are included, accepted, and valued without others feeling pushed away. Each library employee will have to weigh for themselves the potential benefits of being a visible ally for certain populations versus the cost of distancing others. I strive to be as inclusive of as many student populations as I can and let compassion make up for the rest. I have chosen to keep the merch that visibly identifies my allyship for the LGBTQ+ community, even at the risk of offending other students. I want

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to convey that my office is a safe space, especially as liaison to the PRIDE Club, but I also make no attempt to change the minds of other students who do not agree with my perspective. Sometimes, the best we might be able to expect is tolerance toward differing viewpoints. And this is a tension I still wrestle with. Am I doing a disservice to some of

the students I serve by accepting that in some situations, tolerance might be the goal? Other library employees may come to different decisions, and that is absolutely acceptable. These kinds of questions do not have "one size fits all" answers.

Research supports keeping LGBTQ+ allyship paraphernalia visible. One study found that listing Safe Zone badges on physicians' online biographies led to more appointments scheduled, and the effect was significant even after controlling for patients with homophobic viewpoints.[46] Patients were more willing to meet a new doctor who had gone through Safe Zone training and publicly advertised their training than doctors who did not. Perhaps students may be more willing to discuss their questions, confusion, and frustration about research with library employees who advertise that they have been through similar training programs.

I hope that my efforts can promote a culture of inclusion and compassion among library employees, and hope that students will be able to feel the effect of the climate that we have worked hard to establish, realizing that they have found a place where they belong. As academic libraries grow into brave spaces, hopefully students will increasingly recognize that intellectual freedom is valued, and we can encourage discussion of contentious issues as long as students display genuine interest and respect. We will not agree on everything with all students, and in fact, it is better that we do not! But we can agree that we will do our best to provide all students with the best level of service possible.

Conclusion

Working toward impactful inclusivity has become standard for many academic libraries. But inclusivity is an inadequate end goal. It is not enough to strive for inclusion. Practices and policies that are only concerned with inclusion result in broad-stroke efforts in a context where nuance, learning, intellectual freedom, and individuality thrive. Libraries also need to intentionally consider how to approach interactions with individuals when inclusion is feared, or they have needs beyond what inclusion is able to satisfy. Many students will never realize the effort the library puts into creating an inclusive student experience. But they *will* remember whether they felt that they belonged in their library. Carefully shaping an environment where students feel accepted, respected, included, and supported in their library fosters a mental and emotional mindset where students build the confidence to pursue intellectual creativity, are not afraid to seek assistance, and flourish not just in their academics, but among their peers as well.

Academic libraries should strive for all students to experience belonging, and while it cannot be forced, libraries can ensure that the environment is conducive and supportive for belonging to naturally arise. While many scholars have called for empathy to inform library practice, empathy has the potential to cause emotional distress and burnout for employees. Compassion, on the other hand, requires an employee to decide to act in order to relieve a student's concerns or distress. Moments when a student is in need, and someone steps in to help are the moments that a student will remember. Belonging is not only memorable for the student, but it is impactful as it results in closer social connections and higher rates of persistence and use of campus services.[47] Academic libraries should shift their focus beyond inclusiveness and empathy, seeking to make belonging a powerful but common student experience.

Emily Reed is a reference and instruction librarian at Penn State Harrisburg, email: emilyreed@ psu.edu, ORCID: 0000-0001-8731-7980.

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