

Assessing community needs

Reliable data can be invaluable when implementing trans-inclusive practices. Since library card applications are not an appropriate data collection instrument for the reasons listed above, we suggest the following methods for collecting these data in a rigorous and respectful manner.

Surveys

Surveys can help identify specific needs within your service area. Since libraries are “grossly underutilized as an information resource” by transgender communities (Beiriger & Jackson, 2008, p. 52), it is important to survey both users and non-users of your library.

Focus groups

Focus group is a well-established methodology for evaluating patron satisfaction and identifying unmet needs. It is important for a focus group facilitator to be familiar with transgender issues to ensure that this conversation is comfortable and productive.

Comprehensive community needs assessment

The National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE) explains that a community needs assessment is “a big project and one that is most fruitful when you take the time to do it carefully and thoroughly. It can include[...] studying what information already exists about the community, talking to leaders for their input, using surveys, holding focus groups and conducting town meetings or community forums where people can address the issues.” (2006) An excellent example is Oak Park Public Library’s needs assessment of the transgender community (*Service focus committee: Transgender people report*, 2007).

Whenever assessing community needs, it is crucial to include voices from throughout the transgender community, including people of color, youth, elders, and people with a diverse range of gender identities.

Asking respectfully

If a library finds it necessary to collect gender data, the following guidelines can help to make these questions more inclusive:

- Clearly label gender fields as optional.
- Use the term *gender identity*, rather than *gender* or *sex*.
- Provide a free-text field rather than a necessarily incomplete list of options.
- If you need to list options, think critically about their order. Many forms put the term *male* first and *female* and various transgender identities last. Alphabetizing these options is a simple way to challenge the sexism and transphobia typical on such forms.
- Avoid using alienating and inaccurate terms, such as *other* or *n/a*.

The Williams Institute has published a helpful report on asking these types of questions in respectful ways (The GenIUSS Group, 2014).

References

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- The GenIUSS Group. (2014). *Best practices for asking questions to identify transgender and other gender minority respondents on population-based surveys*. (J. L. Herman, Ed.). Los Angeles, CA: The Williams Institute.

Transgender-inclusive Library Card Applications: Issues and Recommendations

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Introduction

Some libraries collect information about a patron's gender identity or physical sex on their library card applications, or on other forms throughout the library. These types of questions put an unnecessary burden on transgender library patrons and can exclude them from library services.

There are a number of reasons not to include gender on your library card applications or other forms:

- These questions out transgender patrons, which can lead to harassment or physical violence.
- Transgender patrons may need to make future changes to the gender information in their record, which can also disclose their transgender identity and lead to harassment or violence.

Forms typically offer a very limited set of options for describing gender identities. A patron may not identify with any of the available terms, which may make them feel excluded.

- Reducing unnecessary data collection minimizes the potential harm of a confidentiality breach.
- Reducing unnecessary data collection creates a less time-consuming application process for all patrons.

Libraries often collect information about patrons' gender identities simply because they are accustomed to doing so. If this information is not truly needed for providing library service, this author suggests eliminating these questions from your forms altogether.

However, there may be some barriers to eliminating these questions, or compelling arguments for collecting the gender identities of your patrons. This pamphlet will describe these situations and suggest some solutions that are respectful of transgender patrons.

ILS limitations

Some ILS software requires staff to enter a patron's gender when adding them to the system. If your library does not ask for gender on library card applications, but the ILS requires this information, circulation staff may have to enter their own best guess about a patron's gender. Therefore, it is advisable to work with your ILS vendor or technical support contacts to remove these requirements before going gender-free on your forms.

If gender-related fields cannot be removed, establishing a clear policy about how to collect and enter patron gender data will simplify this process for circulation staff and patrons.

ILS approach the gender field differently:

- Certain ILSs, such as Polaris and Koha, require all patron records to include a gender field by default. Note that Polaris also includes a "n/a" option in this required field.

- Certain other ILSs include an optional gender field in patron records. Staff members can leave the field blank in accordance with a patron's wishes or library policies.
- A number of ILSs, such as Evergreen, Millennium, and Voyager, simply do not include any gender field in patron records.

Some ILSs allow system administrators to modify fields in the patron record, while others do not. Koha is open source, so libraries can make a small modification to its code to remove the required gender field. Libraries using other software may have to work with their ILS vendor to remove the field.

Customer service implications

Some libraries use gender-specific language when providing customer service. This includes terms such as *Mam* or *Sir*, or titles such as *Mrs.*, *Ms.*, or *Mr.*

Some library customer service workers may feel uncomfortable if they are used to providing this type of service, but are unable to look up a patron's gender in their ILS.

In many instances, it can be preferable to simply address patrons using their full name, or first name only. Many patrons feel that using their name is more personable. When staff members don't know a patron's name, they can refer to them by the clothing they are wearing. Both of these approaches remove the possibility of misgendering patrons (both cisgender and transgender).

To curtail the harm that gendered language and misgendering can cause, it is crucial to train staff members not to make assumptions about the genders of your patrons.

Forms for library staff

Remember that forms can exclude transgender people on both sides of the desk. Library staff may feel uncomfortable disclosing their gender identities in forms for their employer. Review the forms that employees are expected to fill out, and evaluate the necessity of any gender-related questions.