

Katherine O'Clair

At the intersection of academic librarianship and social justice

Stand up

Earlier this year I experienced my most challenging professional moment as a librarian and educator. I have had my fair share of challenging situations and circumstances over the years, yet this particular challenge involving a student group's class project would situate my personal and professional values on a head-on collision course.

As a college librarian, I routinely consult with students working on real-world projects (our educational philosophy is *learn by doing*) and assist them with finding and using all types of information. After more than a decade of practicing this daily, I have grown very comfortable in this role. Consequently, when I received an email from a student group requesting my assistance, I approached it as I always do—with interest and excitement. As my eyes scrolled across the screen reading the background about their project, I quickly realized this case of providing research assistance was going to be anything but typical.

This all-male group of students was requesting my assistance with finding market research for the new product they were developing—a “gag” gift that prominently featured a double entendre connecting a fruit and part of the male anatomy.

Shocked by what I was reading, I immediately read it again, certain that in the routine nature of such requests I had misread what they had shared. I clicked on the link to the

website they provided, and my jaw dropped when my initial reaction was confirmed. My heart raced as I quickly explored the content of their website, which contained quiet undertones of misogyny, homophobia, and bullying. I'm always willing to help students, but I didn't want to help *these students* with *this project*.

As I mentioned before, I rarely find myself in such a situation. Usually, students are asking for assistance with finding articles for their term papers or acquiring market research. To compound the complexity of this particular situation, our campus, similar to others across the country, was experiencing a powerful movement of student activism challenging the social inequalities that marginalize too many. This made it all the more important for me to hit this challenge head-on. If we are going to change the dynamic on campus, it has to start somewhere, and why not with me? After all, if I said nothing, my silence could be construed as positive reinforcement that would only perpetuate the problem.

I'm quite comfortable engaging in dialogue about the issues surrounding power and privilege, especially in the context of

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working towards increasing diversity and inclusion.

For instance, I have served as the chair of our library's inclusion and diversity committee for the past four years. I also participate regularly in dialogues with other faculty and staff on issues and concerns related to diversity and inclusion. In addition, I am a faculty co-advisor for a campus organization for underrepresented students. Despite my extensive involvement in activities to promote diversity and inclusion, I have never intertwined my strong beliefs and ideals with providing assistance to students whom, to me, were developing and promoting a product that would perpetuate long-standing stereotypes and oppressive actions. I clearly understood it was a

joke. All in good fun, right? But isn't this a typical vehicle for marginalizing those who are different?

Despite my extensive participation and involvement in efforts to promote diversity and inclusion on our campus, I found myself feeling that I needed guidance and direction from someone with more training and experience in handling such issues. I am fortunate to have excellent resources on my campus with individuals who could assist and advise me on how best to navigate the situation in which I found myself.

I consulted a colleague who is an instructional specialist in inclusive excellence on our campus. Her guidance and advice not only gave me practical approaches and solutions I could employ (in less than two hours), but it also made me feel more comfortable about the situation and my ability to engage in an open dialogue with these young men. As a result of my conversation with her I suddenly found myself in a different space—I wanted to help *these students* with *this project*.

All in all, my meeting with the students went fairly well. At my request, the students' instructor attended with me. I felt I was able

to address my concerns in a constructive and effective manner, sharing both my personal and professional opinions about their product and the content of their website. I also related it to the larger conversations we are having on our campus about social justice and inequality. I emphasized that just as I have a right to my opinions, they have an equal right to exercise their intellectual and academic freedoms. I didn't tell them that their idea or product was bad and they should not move forward. Instead I encouraged them to think about the messaging behind their product and how it might be perceived by some.


Almost organically, I found myself encouraging them to consider openly address-

ing some of the issues surrounding the potential negative impacts of their product and marketing campaign by incorporating dialogue that included alternative viewpoints. The li-

brarian in me also provided guidance on how to research corporate social responsibility, so they could be informed about what others have done and do to address and overcome criticism of their products or actions.

What struck me the most was these young male students' capacity to listen respectfully to what I was sharing. The instructor commented afterwards that it was a learning experience for all. I couldn't agree more, and I was grateful for the opportunity to learn and grow myself.

It is our responsibility to stand up for academic and intellectual freedom, and it is equally our responsibility to take a stand against social injustice. At the onset of the situation I have shared I thought I had to be on one side or the other, but in the process I discovered that one can, and probably should, be on both.

In closing, I leave you with the question, What would you do if you found yourself being challenged to stand up for both your personal and professional values? 

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