
Finding the Line

John Michaud

I am writing about my new job at a medium-security prison for adult male felons. The library is a little more than two years old and I am the third librarian to hold the position. Things are a lot different here from the public library where I used to work. For one thing, along with my library science degree, I now have a correctional officer's certificate.

In order to fulfill the requirements of the Department of Correction, I had to complete a four week course at the North Carolina Justice Academy a few months after being hired—sort of a basic training. The curriculum covered such arcane subjects as unarmed self-defense, pistol qualification, training in case of a riot and some useful courses in interpersonal skills. In all the classes I sat through, there was one lesson to be learned: my basic duty as a prison employee is to protect the public from those individuals judged a threat to society. This means that as I deliver library services I must never forget that the patron is an inmate. Finding the line between staff and inmates is not always easy.

As an experienced bookman, I know that a visit to the library should be more than a series of inmate/staff confrontations.

Centrally located to the five cell blocks, the library contains 800 square feet of floor space with shelving for around 7,000 books and seating for ten patrons. The inventory stands at 4,031 books including paperbacks. The library also houses a small record collection with two stereo turntables that transmit to wireless headphones. To help me I have two inmate assistants. They manage the circulation desk and the stereo system, shelve books, file and process books; however, a lot of routine work like answering the telephone and photocopying cannot be delegated to them for reasons of internal security. One of

the library assistants spins the records, but the institution rules mandate that the librarian sign out the headphones. So, when I am at a meeting or someplace else on business, there is no music. Inmates who come to the library must hand me a pass as well as sign in. When they get ready to leave, I sign them back to their cell blocks.

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visit to the library should be more than a series of inmate/staff confrontations. So the major challenge of my job is to create a real library within the prison (a library equipped with a card catalog, classified books and materials that reflect the interests and needs of the residents) and, in the process, demonstrate to some skeptics that the library can be a place for information and leisure time enjoyment. The notion of quality prison library service is slow to materialize for obvious reasons: the system's basic function is incarcerating individuals; consequently, money for building a book collection has low priority. As a matter of fact funding by the Department of Correction for library materials is negligible, all of it going to by magazines. Fortunately, we currently have a small LSCA Title I grant; on the other hand, because of cumbersome purchasing procedures, it is difficult to spend the grant funds in such a way as to respond to the reading interests of the inmates. As I was heard to say recently, "Buying books is not like procuring ammunition."

The collection remains essentially an odd assortment of discarded books and "gifts." For titles not in the collection, I rely on the State Library's interlibrary loan network. Another good source of books is a rotating collection provided

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to us by the Neuse Regional Library. While the typical inmate reads on a sixth grade level, reading interests are surprisingly varied, from solar powered satellites and plate tectonics to C. Wright Mills and Sufism. Paperback fiction, especially westerns, accounts for most of the circulation. There is also a steady demand for the classics, black history, religion, art and school related subjects.

The longer I work at it, the more confident I am of finding a workable compromise between being a librarian and being a correctional officer.

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The library is a popular place and I enjoy making it work. It serves an average daily inmate population of 450 and the institutional staff. There are 1,150 inmate library visits a month. Of course, many come simply to listen to music or to scan the special "anatomy magazines." Book circulation has increased concomitantly with collection development. By the way, statistics for this library's productivity tend to understate the output as books are often passed around from one resident to another or they simply leave under someone's shirt.

In the game of tennis that I like to play, it's always good to get out there and play a tough opponent. It improves one's game. And, it's a characteristic of this job that the longer I work at it, the more confident I am of finding a workable compromise between being a librarian and being a correctional officer.

H. William O'Shea, Jr., chairman of the NCLA Nominating Committee, has announced the following election results:

<i>Vice-President/President-Elect</i>	Patsy J. Hansel
<i>Second Vice-President</i>	Edith Briles
<i>Secretary</i>	Dorothy W. Campbell
<i>Treasurer</i>	Nancy C. Fogarty
<i>Directors</i>	Arial A. Stephens
	Benjamin F. Speller
<i>ALA Representative</i>	Fred Roper

President of the organization for 1985-87 is Pauline F. Myrick.

David Harrington, chairman of the North Carolina Association of School Librarians Nominating Committee, has announced the following results of the 1985 NCASL elections:

<i>Vice-Chairman/Chairman-Elect</i>	Carol Southerland
<i>Director at Large 1985-89</i>	Carolyn Burgman
<i>Director Geographical Area</i>	
1985-89	Kathy Kiser
<i>AASL Affiliate Assembly Delegate</i>	
1985-86	Glenn Wall

Chairman of NCASL for 1985-87 is Helen Tugwell.