

Making the Medical Library of the University of Bern a caring and safe space

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Abstract

In alignment with the University of Bern's broader efforts to combat discrimination and uphold inclusivity, the Medical Library (BibMED) at the University of Bern has launched the Caring Library initiative. This initiative promotes a safe, welcoming space through twenty guiding principles displayed prominently behind the information desk. These principles, such as respect, inclusion, and solidarity, serve as a daily reminder of the values that keep our community caring and discrimination-free. This article describes the motivations behind the Caring Library initiative. The BibMED is committed to fostering an environment where all backgrounds and identities are valued and respected.

Key words: libraries; diversity; inclusion.

Caring library

The staff at the Medical Library (BibMED) of the University of Bern warmly welcomes everyone to use the library as a space for learning and connection. We are committed to fostering an inclusive environment that is free from discrimination and stigma, where every person is valued and respected. Our commitment is reflected in twenty guiding principles that define a *safe* and *caring* library. We encourage all library users to preserve this atmosphere by treating others with compassion and respect, and by offering support when needed. We display this statement prominently on a wall behind the Medical Library (BibMED) information counter. Alongside it, we have framed illustrations that highlight the fundamental principles of a caring library and encourage staff and users to actively contribute to an inclusive environment (*Figure 1 and 2*). For years, the BibMED has been dedicated to creating a discrimination-free space for our diverse community of staff and users. We demonstrate this commitment through our initiatives, which include engaging in social media awareness campaigns, displaying the Progress Pride flag and anti-racism posters on library walls, and offer-

ing a quiet Self-Care Space in which people can rest and unwind. The space is made private by curtains, equipped with plants, and furnished with mats, mattresses, and giant convertible beanbags. The BibMED has organized events like screening of *Dear White People* by Justin Simien, hosting readings on sexualized violence with Agota Lavoyer, featuring the work of artist Lucy Neidhart on sexual consent for Sexual Harassment Awareness Day (1), celebrating the World Mental Health Day by showcasing books on the subject and offering free tea every week, organizing visits by therapy dogs to promote stress relief during semester or final exams (2, 3). We have collaborated with student organizations such as the FSMB (Fachschaft Medizin der Universität Bern, the association of medical students) to host game evenings, and with the BLS (@bier.life.support) student association to organize parties at the BibMed where students can dance and chill (4). We also collaborate with CLASH Bern (Collectif de Lutte contre les Attitudes Sexistes en milieu Hospitalier), a student collective that works to combat sexism and sexual harassment in hospital and university settings (5).

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Fig. 1. A wall behind the Medical Library (BibMED) information counter, with some of the fundamental principles of a caring library.

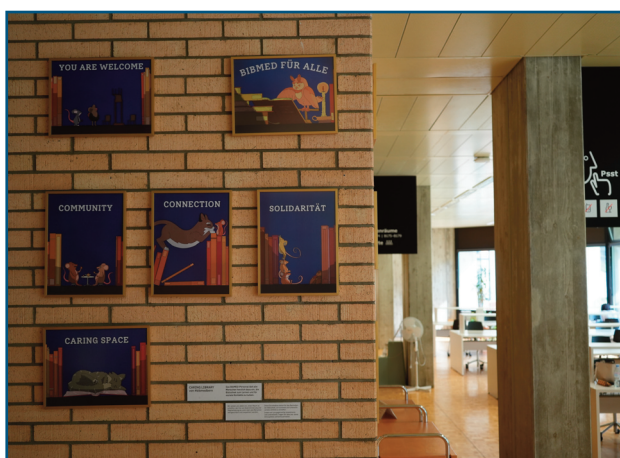


Fig. 2. Framed illustrations that highlight some of the fundamental principles of a caring library.

Discrimination affects us all

Discrimination – the unequal, disadvantaging treatment of groups of people enforced by structural and institutional power – harms us all, regardless of our racial or ethnic background, cultural heritage, gender, sexual orientation, age, physical abilities, mental or physical health, or socioeconomic status. The University libraries are embedded within institutions of learning, where structural oppressions including racism, ethnocentrism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism, ableism, mental health, physical health, and classism, continue to exert force. The University of Bern recognizes these structural prob-

lems, as highlighted by Vice-Rector Prof. Dr. Heike Mayer in her address during the 15th Action Week Against Racism in the city of Bern. Her message, titled *Racism Concerns Us All!*, affirmed: "Racism is a societal problem that does not leave educational institutions untouched. That is why the University of Bern is committed to protecting against discrimination and combating racism at structural, institutional, and individual levels. We are working on sustainable change by implementing specific measures".

The Vice-Rector further reassured the community that those who experience or witness racism will receive support. Any university affiliate can confidentially report discrimination at the Office for Equal Opportunities. The university unequivocally states: "The University of Bern does not tolerate discrimination of any kind" (6).

One month later, on Sexual Harassment Awareness Day, Rector Prof. Dr. Virginia Richter addressed the employees with the following message: "At the University of Bern, we do not tolerate sexual harassment or sexism. Successful learning and working can only take place in a climate of trust and mutual respect. The University of Bern is legally bound to protect its members from sexual harassment. All employees have the right to have their personal integrity protected and their personal boundaries respected at work" (personal communication).

Aligned with the university's commitment, The BibMED actively seeks to minimize microaggressions – subtle, yet harmful and repetitive everyday discriminatory actions towards members of historically marginalized groups, including women, people of color, people who are elderly, LGBTQ+ people, people with disabilities, people with chronic illnesses or mental health conditions, and people with socio-economic or class disadvantages. Neither physical nor psychological violence is permitted in the library. Respecting others' boundaries is a core value.

Twenty core principles of BibMED

The twenty core principles of BibMED are: *BibMED for all; You are welcome; BibMED loves you; Safe space; Caring space; Our space; You matter; You are not alone; We are all diverse; Inclusion; Networking; Community; Connection; Self care; Solidarity; Unlearning; Awareness; Respect; Peace; Understanding.*

You might wonder how a place of learning like a uni-

versity library can also be a caring space? As part of our ongoing efforts to foster a comfortable and inviting library, we prominently display twenty core principles behind the library's information desk, ensuring they are visible to everyone who uses the BibMED. These serve as a daily reminder to staff and patrons to foster a safe and inclusive space.

We arrived at these principles through our reading and our media viewing (6-9). We highlight terms that characterize and promote a caring atmosphere. Some terms consistently appeared in these varied sources, including *welcoming, peace, safe space, caring, inclusion, understanding, awareness, connections, respect, solidarity, self-care, and community*. Out of the consistent terms, we selected twenty to display.

On orientation days for prospective students, first-year medical students are introduced to the principles underlying our goal of establishing a Caring Library where no one is marginalized, and all individuals feel welcome and supported. They are encouraged to demonstrate moral courage by rejecting discriminatory behaviors and reporting any incidents of discrimination or harassment they observe.

Definitions for the twenty principles

We suggest the following definitions for our twenty principles:

- *BibMED for everyone* – the BibMED welcomes everyone equally;
- *You are welcome* – you belong here;
- *BibMED loves you* – the BibMED values, supports, and invests in you;
- *Safe space* – we foster an environment where everyone feels safe and protected;
- *Caring space* – a space dedicated to physical, social, spiritual, and mental relaxation;
- *Our space* – the library is our space;
- *You matter* – we respect the needs and preferences of all users and staff;
- *You are not alone* – we will help you if you need support;
- *We are all diverse* – we acknowledge and celebrate our differences;
- *Inclusion* – we welcome diversity in our inclusive community;
- *Networking* – we foster connection and collaboration;

- *Community* – together, we form the BibMED community, where all are welcome and respected;
- *Connection* – we encourage users and staff to make meaningful connections;
- *Self-care* – take care of your mental, physical, and social health;
- *Solidarity* – we work together and support each other to achieve our goals;
- *Unlearning* – we make space for new ideas, challenge biases and assumptions, and value growth;
- *Awareness* – we are respectful, attentive, and considerate of others' boundaries;
- *Respect* – we engage with others as equals, treat them fairly, and accept their boundaries;
- *Peace* – the BibMED space is free from violence and hostility;
- *Understanding* – we strive to understand others' perspectives.

Future directions

These twenty core principles are both symbolic and aspirational. We are committed to establishing a safe and caring library at the University of Bern.

We hope to expand our initiatives. For example, organizing discussions around these principles, by designating a special “awareness week” for each one, where we would ask students to share their thoughts or experiences in short video messages on social media. Our library users and staff could also identify further words and concepts to add to our principles on social media. And we could also present this project at conferences or write academic papers on the topic.

For now, we are focused on building a caring BibMED community by encouraging self-reflection and actively fostering inclusive and supportive practices. We who have worked on this project have found it a rewarding experience, made even more meaningful by the BibMED's leadership, which has demonstrated its commitment by proactively supporting initiatives that cultivate an inclusive culture.

Conclusion

The Caring Library initiative at the Medical Library (BibMED) of the University of Bern exemplifies a deep commitment to inclusivity, respect, and well-being within an academic space. By fostering a discrimination-free environment and actively promoting the values of *belonging, safety, and community*, BibMED sets the

standard for a supportive university library. Through its diverse initiatives – including the creation of self-care spaces, awareness campaigns, and collaboration with student organizations – the Caring Library actively challenges structural discrimination and microaggressions. Displaying our twenty core principles reminds us daily of their importance and invites all users to contribute to our culture of compassion and support. We look ahead to expanding the project, engaging our users and staff more deeply, and broadening academic discourse.

Acknowledgements

About the project

Mohamed Wa Baile initiated this project in collaboration with Claudia Schumacher and Raul Bison (all from the University Library of Bern). Mohamed Wa Baile researched and selected the terms that we use as our principles; he also proposed the labels and determined the order of the frames on the wall. Claudia Schumacher selected the frames and designed the labels. Raul Bison chose and created the illustrations. Our three-person team regularly met in person and online to propose and discuss ideas. Daniel Giot, the caretaker of the building installed our frames and the labels. The social media team (comprising library staff and medical students) continues to raise awareness on Instagram, where they highlight the twenty principles and our other campaigns.

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