

# Pennsylvania Libraries: Research & Practice

Commentary

## Advocates for Access and Empowering Communities

*The Importance of Library Workers in the Fight for Intellectual Freedom*

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The role of libraries and library workers amid rising challenges to intellectual freedom, increasing political polarization, and shifting community expectations is examined. Framed by the belief that "librarianship and library work is a profound act of hope," it explores how libraries can remain steadfast defenders of equitable information access while fostering dialogue and inclusion. Three central themes are explored: advocacy for access, libraries as inclusive spaces, and preparing for emerging challenges. It highlights the growing prevalence of book challenges and emphasizes the need for strong policies, community partnerships, and empathetic engagement to uphold intellectual freedom. Ultimately, this calls for library workers to act with "courage, compassion, and conviction," asserting that their daily work shapes the future of libraries as democratic, empowering, and community-centered institutions.

### Introduction

I truly believe that at its heart librarianship and library work is a profound act of hope. It's the belief that access to information can empower individuals, transform communities, and sustain democracy. Yet today, that hope and the very principle of intellectual freedom is being tested like never before.

Book challenges and bans are still an ever-present issue; debates around what constitutes "appropriate" materials continue to be pervasive; and in our increasingly polarized world, libraries often find themselves on the frontlines of social and political divides, such as the current administration's attempts to defund the IMLS. For many of us, the question is no longer, 'Will we face these challenges?' but rather, 'When they arrive, how will we respond?'

Today's libraries and library workers can act both as protectors of information access and as builders of bridges in divided communities. To explore this let's look at three core themes: library workers as advocates, libraries as inclusive spaces, and looking ahead to the future.

## Core Theme 1: Library workers as Advocates for Access

As library workers, we are entrusted with a profound responsibility: to ensure that all individuals regardless of age, background, belief, or identity have access to the information and ideas they need to flourish. This responsibility becomes even more critical in moments when access is threatened. From book challenges to debates over the use of inclusive language, the pressures we face today are not abstract – they are real, they are escalating, and they are impacting the very communities we serve.

In Pennsylvania in 2024 there were 27 book challenges reported to ALA, targeting 75 individual titles. The good news is that this is down from 2023. However, to put this into perspective, over the first 20 years that ALA tracked book challenges starting in 2001, PA averaged about 10 challenges per year, targeting 10 titles. What we see happening in the Commonwealth does essentially mirror what we have seen nationally over the past couple of years. However, in the face of these challenges, we are not powerless. We have the tools, the knowledge, and the commitment to stand as advocates of access for all and in all forms. How can we turn this commitment into action, not only defending intellectual freedom but fostering a culture of access that reflects the rich tapestry of human experience?

To discuss this, we will look at intellectual freedom in practice, advocacy as a community effort, and balancing advocacy with empathy.

### Intellectual Freedom in Practice

Let's start with what advocacy for intellectual freedom looks like in practice. At its core, intellectual freedom isn't just about avoiding censorship; it's about ensuring equitable access to a multiplicity of ideas. It's about creating collections and spaces that embrace perspectives from across the spectrum, including those that might challenge us or our communities. Consider, for example, the importance of including materials that represent marginalized voices. Ensuring that underrepresented communities see themselves reflected in our collections is a crucial part of intellectual freedom. But with that comes the question: how do we respond to those who might seek to remove these materials under the guise of "protecting" others? This is where having clear policies and procedures in place becomes vital. A strong collection development policy, aligned with professional standards like the ALA's Library Bill of Rights, serves as our foundation. It enables us to stand firm, knowing that we are guided by principles rather than personal preferences or external influences.

### Advocacy as a Community Effort

While our policies guide us, advocacy requires action and often collaboration. Advocacy for intellectual freedom is not something we do alone; it's something we can do with our communities and our colleagues. One strategy is to engage your community in conversations about intellectual freedom. Host programs or panel discussions that invite diverse perspectives to the table. Create opportunities for patrons to share their stories and experiences. This not only educates the community about the library's role but also demonstrates our commitment to inclusion and dialogue. Another approach is to build partnerships with local organizations or civic groups. These partnerships can amplify our message and help us create broader networks of support. For example, collaborating with a local bookstore for a "Banned Books Week" event can spark important conversations and bring the community together around shared values.

### Balancing Advocacy with Empathy

Of course, advocacy isn't without its challenges. We often encounter deeply held beliefs and strong emotions from those who oppose certain materials or programs. How do we remain true to our professional values while still engaging respectfully with these voices?

One way to approach these conversations is with empathy and a commitment to dialogue (if others are open to it). Listen actively to concerns, seek to understand where they are coming from, and then explain the library's role as a facilitator of access, not a gatekeeper of specific moral values. It's not about agreeing, but about helping others see that intellectual freedom is a shared right, not a selective one. Remember, the goal is not just to win an argument but to build trust and understanding. By consistently demonstrating our commitment to equitable access, we create the possibility for common ground, even in the face of disagreement.

Ultimately, our advocacy for intellectual freedom is not just about defending access today, it's about ensuring it for tomorrow. Every decision we make, every policy we uphold, and every conversation we engage in shapes the future of what our libraries stand for.

As we navigate these challenges together, let's remember this: advocacy is a practice, not a position. It's something we do every day, in every interaction, with every opportunity to champion access and inclusion. By standing firm in our professional values while staying open to dialogue, we can ensure that intellectual freedom remains at the heart of what libraries do.

## Core Theme 2: Libraries as Inclusive Spaces

Now let's discuss libraries as inclusive spaces. Historically speaking, libraries haven't always been welcoming to all. However, throughout a handful of decades now, libraries have been celebrated as *neutral* spaces—where anyone, regardless of their background or beliefs, can access the information they need. But as we navigate an increasingly divided society, this concept of neutrality is being re-examined. How can we be neutral while also ensuring that the materials we provide and the programs we create reflect the full tapestry of our communities? Should we truly be neutral?

The answer lies in the idea that neutrality doesn't mean passivity. Neutrality can mean upholding a commitment to intellectual freedom, ensuring that all voices, especially those that have been historically marginalized, are represented. How can we, as library workers, create spaces that are not only inclusive but also serve as catalysts for understanding and empathy in our communities? I feel the answer to this lies in the power of inclusive collections and fostering dialogue and understanding.

### The Power of Inclusive Collections

First, inclusive collections are a cornerstone of intellectual freedom. They ensure that everyone can find their experiences, histories, and identities reflected in the library. This means actively seeking out and including materials that represent marginalized and underrepresented voices whether that's authors of color, LGBTQ+ perspectives, or materials that challenge mainstream narratives. But let's be honest: this work can draw criticism. For example, adding a book that addresses systemic racism or gender identity might lead to challenges from individuals or groups who see these topics as controversial. This is where our commitment to intellectual freedom must be unwavering. By developing strong collection development policies and being transparent about our processes, we can respond to challenges confidently and constructively.

### Fostering Dialogue and Understanding

But libraries are more than just repositories of knowledge. They are spaces where communities come together to learn, to share, and to grow. We have a unique opportunity to foster understanding in divided times by creating programs and initiatives that encourage dialogue. For example, hosting facilitated discussions on difficult topics such as censorship, climate change, or social justice can provide a moment for diverse voices and perspectives to come

together. These programs not only enrich our communities, they also reinforce the library's role as a safe space for exploration and engagement. Another way to foster understanding is through story times, exhibits, or displays that celebrate diverse thought and not just on certain months of the year. These initiatives can help bridge divides by showcasing shared values and promoting empathy across differences.

## Core Theme 3: Looking Ahead—Preparing for Emerging Challenges

As we reflect on the challenges we face today, it's also crucial to look forward. The landscape of intellectual freedom is constantly evolving, and as library workers, we must be proactive in anticipating and preparing for additional threats, none of which are truly new. From the rapid spread of misinformation and disinformation to growing concerns about data privacy, the challenges ahead may be evolving, but they remain rooted in the same principles: access, equity, and the right to know. How can we prepare ourselves and our libraries for the future?

### Combating Misinformation

A significant issue we face is the proliferation of misinformation, disinformation, and increasingly, missing information. While this is not new, it is certainly an increasing threat to fostering a well-informed citizenry. Libraries have a critical role to play in addressing this issue, not by telling people what to believe, but by equipping them with the skills to critically evaluate information. This is increasingly important as we begin to question once trusted resources such as government webpages and databases like PubMed and ERIC. We fight against misinformation by integrating digital literacy and media literacy into our programming and services. Workshops, online resources, and even partnerships with local organizations can help our patrons develop the skills they need to navigate today's *and tomorrow's* information landscape with confidence.

### Protecting Privacy in a Digital World

Another growing concern is the issue of privacy. As libraries and our patrons increasingly rely on digital resources, online social networks, and generative AI, we must be vigilant in protecting our patrons' personal information and impress upon them the importance of protecting their own privacy.

This involves not only ensuring the security of our systems but also educating our patrons about their digital footprints. It includes being open and transparent about our own privacy policies. When our community realizes we are making every effort to protect their privacy they feel more comfortable in our spaces and seeking our resources. Offering workshops on online privacy or creating guides on how to protect personal data can empower our users to take control of their digital lives while reinforcing the library's role as a trusted advocate for their rights.

## Conclusion: A Call to Action

To bring this all together, intellectual freedom is not just a professional obligation, it is imperative. It's the belief that every individual has the right to access information, to explore a range of perspectives, and to form their own conclusions. As library workers, we stand on the frontlines of this commitment. We are advocates, educators, and bridge-builders, working tirelessly to ensure that the library remains a space where knowledge flourishes and communities come together. In the face of challenges, whether it's a book ban, a contentious conversation, or the next big societal shift, let us remember the values that brought us to this profession. Let us act with courage, compassion, and conviction, knowing that the work we do today will shape the libraries of tomorrow.