



Fighting Book Bans across the US

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Organizations such as the American Library Association (ALA), EveryLibrary, and PEN America have been tracking the sharp escalation of book challenges since 2021. These challenges have centered on school and public libraries across the United States; the number of challenges and bans is higher than it's been in more than twenty years.

Often, books and materials with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ+) authors, themes, and protagonists are targeted for removal or restriction. Likewise, books that contain themes of social justice or institutional racial injustice (frequently written by or featuring Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color or BIPOC) are common targets.

In 2022, ALA documented 1,269 attempts to censor library books and resources; however, this organization estimates that the vast majority of challenges are not reported to them, so the actual number of censorship attempts is likely much higher.

As a library science faculty member, I have paid close attention to this data, as well as the numerous stories and anecdotes I hear from working librarians in Kentucky (where I live and teach) and across the country. Since 2021, I have given fifteen talks and webinars about intellectual freedom and censorship (and I'm giving five more yet in 2023!), many of them with national or international audiences. Librarians and community members are hungry to learn about this topic.

I have been studying intellectual freedom and censorship since I began my graduate studies in the early 2000s,

but I have never seen situations like librarians are currently facing: angry community members who refuse to have civil conversations, who accuse librarians of hateful things, and who want to ban all people from reading books that only a few find offensive. As I watched the book challenge attempts escalate and I spoke with library workers, I realized two things: many people had valuable stories and perspectives to share, and I could help facilitate this process.

From these realizations, I developed a new edited book: *The Fight Against Book Bans: Perspectives from the Field*. Published by Libraries Unlimited, it contains twenty chapters, primarily written by library workers and faculty. Each chapter has a different perspective on what is happening with book banning and what can be done to counter-challenge the would-be censors. For example, some chapters were written by librarians who went through book challenges and offer advice to others who will encounter similar tactics.

However, there are even more perspectives and valuable contributions, beyond what fit in the book; these additional viewpoints are shared in this issue of the *Journal of Intellectual Freedom and Privacy*. First is a commentary by Dr. Nicole A. Cooke and Cearra N. Harris; they explore "soft censorship" and the role of "neutrality" in light of the ongoing book bans.



Librarian Aryssa Damron, next, describes the history of bans placed on books by author Ellen Hopkins, from the perspective of an avid reader. Dr. Paul T. Jaeger, Allison Jennings-Roche, and Olivia J. Hodge explain another front in the anti-intellectual freedom campaign: state-level laws that try to criminalize parts of librarianship. Next, Dr. Sarah Beth Nelson describes three experiences she had as a school librarian, showing different views of potential and actual

ensorship. Richard Beaudry and Dr. Toni Samek investigate the spread of American-style censorship campaigns to school libraries in Canada. Finally, Michael Kirby examines how author and activist Wendell Berry can inform our perspective on intellectual freedom.

I hope these authors will inform and galvanize the readers for the fight against censorship!