



The Next Library–Correctional Association Confab

Author _ Christopher M. Jimenez (jimenezc@fiu.edu), Associate Librarian, Information and Research Services Department, Florida International University.

The author examines the issue of censorship in prison libraries through the lens of the conflicting interests between the American Library Association (ALA) and the American Correctional Association (ACA). By referencing a recent PEN America report on prison censorship, the author highlights the concerns raised by prison librarians regarding the violation of library service standards and the denial of prisoners' Right to Read. The article delves into the historical collaboration between the ALA and ACA, noting a lack of joint efforts since the 1980s. It discusses the necessity for renewed collaboration and suggests the formulation of a joint statement to reform censorship practices specifically in prison libraries within correctional systems. The author concludes by underscoring the significance of updated standards and a collaborative approach to support prison librarians in fulfilling their professional obligations and ensuring prisoners' access to information and intellectual freedom.

The latest PEN America report on the state of censorship in prisons focuses on violations of inmate's personal property rights (Marquis and Luna 2023). However, "Section III: Content Neutral Bans" raises the specific concerns of current prison librarians—concerns over direct violations of the Library Standards for Adult Correctional *Institutions*, the ALA Council's *Resolution on Prisoners' Right to Read*, and the joint statement on *The Freedom to Read*, which is widely endorsed by several professional organizations.

For instance, to gain American Correctional Association (ACA) accreditation, most federal facilities need not employ a single librarian, and some states must only employ a single MLIS to run the entire system (Boyington 2020). Quoting from the PEN America report's survey of 20 carceral librarians:

Seventy-four percent . . . wanted to purchase items that are on banned lists, and another 58 percent said they have been

prohibited from offering literature for circulation after purchasing it. Seventy-one percent did not agree with censorship decisions that their prison's administration issued. Seventy-five percent said that although there was a clear policy on banning literature, there was no outlined procedure for librarians to appeal denied literature. Sixty percent said that policies were not followed clearly or consistently, and a mere 12 percent said that they were able to get materials approved on appeal. (Marquis and Luna 2023)



There is a definite conflict of interest between the principles, goals, and ideals of the two professional organizations vying to operate inside the prison industrial complex. The ACA strives to balance the protection of individuals against restrictive means of control and supervision for the purposes of public safety (ACA 2019). Hence, while the principled stances of the ACA are oriented toward the humanity of incarcerated persons, population control remains the core ideal of prison operations. Some facilities may be less restrictive, some facilities may be more restrictive, but all facilities must employ some restrictive means of control. This control necessarily applies to all facets of the complex, including prison libraries.

This control orientation is juxtaposed with the ideals of librarianship, which have prompted the composition of declarations and resolutions championing the rights of the marginalized to access information, including prisoners specifically. The 1992 *Library Standards for Adults in Correctional Institutions* declares in its philosophy section that “Library Services shall ensure the inmate’s right to read and their right to free access to information.” This section goes on to acknowledge that the prison library plays a role within an agency that has security priorities. By framing reading and information access as a right, the Standards situate the observed conflict of interest as a struggle between control and rights, between security and privilege.

A Brief History of ALA and ACA Cooperation

Conspicuously absent from the philosophy section of the 1992 Standards is any mention of the joint documents composed by the ACA and the ALA between the 1940s and the 1980s (ASCLA 1992). The foreword to the 1992 Standards records a brief history of collaboration between the two professional organizations. The initial document referenced was the *Objectives and Standards for Libraries in Adult Prisons and Reformatories*, which was approved in 1944 by both the American Prison Association (predecessor to the ACA) and the ALA. While the ACA went on to publish their own document—the *Objectives and Standards for Libraries in Correctional Institutions*—in 1962, the two professional associations were able to open a joint conversation to review and revise that document in 1966 which they called *A Manual of Correctional Standards*.

The *Manual of Correctional Standards* held sway for fifteen years, until the start of the Reagan presidency in 1981. At

that point, the ALA published their *Library Standards for Adult Correctional Institutions* with input from the ACA. That would prove to be the final collaborative project between the two associations, as the 1992 Standards would be published by the Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies (ASCLA), an arm of the ALA that was formed in 1977, without documenting contribution from the ACA.

During this 15-year lacuna, between 1966 and 1981, the ACA revised its *Declaration of Principles* (the ACA’s guiding documentation) in 1970, which was immediately followed in 1971 by the ALA’s *Prisoner’s Right to Read: An interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights*. Politically, the Nixon Administration enacted the *Controlled Substances Act* in 1970, setting the stage for escalation of “law and order” tactics that have exponentially increased mass incarceration in the United States. It is no wonder that as the goals of incarceration became more punitive, support for rehabilitative programs began to wane.

Moving Forward Together

The key question is how the ALA and the ACA can work together collaboratively as equal partners to effectively operate a functional library service within a correctional facility. The status quo, as evidenced by PEN America’s report, is untenable at best. At its worst, it fosters a situation that undermines the professional reputation and status of our colleagues who work as librarians in correctional institutions.

The newly expanded and revised *Standards for Library Services for the Incarcerated and Detained* is a sorely needed, welcome update to the 1992 *Library Standards for Adult Correctional Institutions*. This is especially true given the impact of the 1994 Crime Bill that the Clinton administration enacted since the standard was published two decades ago. Too much time has passed between revisions. The professionals who serve this population are entitled to standards that equip them to perform their duties at the highest level.

A joint statement between the ALA and ACA could significantly help reform the overly restrictive practices of censorship within correctional systems, especially as they relate to prison library operations and resources. Every effort should be made to bridge the 43-year silence between these two professional associations. It may be too late to come together for the forthcoming ALA Standard, but perhaps the groups may learn a lesson from their joint history and forge a path toward a more collaborative future.



References

- Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies (ASCLA). 1992. "1992 Library Standards for Adult Correctional Institutions." American Library Association. https://www.ala.org/aboutala/offices/diversity/expanding-access-in-carcerated-initiative/1992_library_standards_for_adult_correctional_institutions.
- Boyington, Erin. 2020. "The Fox and the Hedgehog: When Libraries are Behind Bars." In *Intellectual freedom Stories from a Shifting Landscape*, edited by Valerie Nye, 83–94. Chicago: ALA Editions.
- Marquis, Moira, and Juliana Luna. 2023. "Reading Between the Bars: An In-Depth Look at Prison Censorship." PEN America. <https://pen.org/report/reading-between-the-bars/>.
- American Correctional Association (ACA). 2019. "Declaration of Principles." https://www.aca.org/ACA_Member/ACA/ACA_Member/AboutUs/Dec.aspx.