

Survey of Intellectual Freedom Procedures in the United States

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The American Library Association provides a form for librarians to share challenges to library materials for the purposes of gathering data and providing support. In the face of increasing challenges to library materials, some states have also developed local procedures for gathering information and providing local support. In 2023, we distributed a survey to gather information from state, island area, territory, and tribal nation library organizations that do not publicly share their procedures to document their efforts. The results demonstrate significant differences in such procedures across the surveyed entities.

Introduction

Library associations have long played a role in supporting libraries, the professionals therein, and their work. When times are good, they're known for the valuable services they provide in areas like professional development and continuing education, but when crises emerge, library associations are also often pressed into a first-responder role, tasked with providing guidance and moral support to libraries within their communities.

Today, such crises frequently take the form of intellectual freedom (IF) challenges. Libraries within the United States are currently experiencing a noticeable uptick in IF challenges, with the American Library Association (ALA) reporting record numbers of book challenges for every year from 2021 to 2023 (ALA 2024). The overall quantity of challenges has remained significantly higher compared with all years prior to 2020 (ALA 2025).

Although groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), Lambda Legal, and the Freedom to Read Foundation do work in the field of IF, the ALA and its Office of Intellectual Freedom (OIF) are often considered the "front line" of IF support for libraries. However, they are not the only organizations to which libraries confronting IF challenges turn for aid; because of their localized knowledge and support networks, many libraries also seek help from

their state, territory, or tribal nation library associations when they face IF challenges. Unlike the ALA, which has a standardized reporting form and challenge support procedure (ALA 2023), state-level library associations display a wide range of variation in their approaches to reported IF challenges. The survey we created is intended to help develop an understanding of the breadth of variance in IF procedures between these associations and to place them within a broader context of increasingly uniform challenges submitted on a national scale.

Literature Review

The concept of IF has a lengthy history, dating back to the Enlightenment (Ratcliffe 2020). Its introduction into the library world was relatively more recent, with the Chicago Public Library adopting a formal Intellectual Freedom Policy in April of 1936 (Latham 2009). In the nearly century since, it has grown into a touchstone of the profession. The ALA incorporates aspects of IF into both its Library Bill of Rights (2006) and its Code of Ethics (2021). Libraries now strive to maintain diverse collections as a matter of principle while generally opposing attempts at censorship, including challenges to library materials (Oltmann 2017).

This commitment to safeguarding IF principles has brought the country's culture wars into libraries. Book



challenges, or “requests by members of the public to remove, relocate, or restrict books from or within institutions,” can result in ‘banned’ books if the challenge leads to the book’s removal (Knox 2015, 3). This concept has a long history within the United States (Collins 2023; Jaeger et al. 2023), and the use of such challenges has drastically increased over the past several years. Despite ALA data showing that a majority of voters oppose book bans in libraries (ALA 2022), organized groups are fueling large-scale challenge submissions by circulating lists of ‘objectionable’ books over social media (O’Connell-Domenech 2023). Such groups initially focused their efforts on school libraries, but they are now increasingly directing their challenges toward public library materials (Harris and Alter 2023).

Although the groups typically describe the materials they target as being “inappropriate or pornographic,” they are usually “by or about Black or L.G.B.T.Q. people” in some way (Harris and Alter 2022), and the battles their challenges provoke are having a significant impact on library workers. These challenge confrontations are forcing some library professionals out of their positions, whereas others are leaving voluntarily to prioritize their mental health and well-being (Witteveen 2023). Some of those who remain can experience ongoing negative impacts on their “job satisfaction, job security, and their reported outcomes in terms of mental and physical health” (Kohlburn 2023, 14), tied closely to these challenges that question the personal integrity of the library professional(s) involved. Library and information science (LIS) professionals increasingly report feeling a sense of conflict between professional codes of ethics and their personal moral beliefs (Oltmann et al. 2022).

How libraries should respond to these circumstances is a topic of some debate within the literature. Knox (2014) emphasizes the importance of developing policies based on the ALA Code of Ethics (2021) and Library Bill of Rights (2006) and encourages libraries to rely on their ‘symbolic capital’ within their communities to mobilize allies in support of their efforts. Political maneuvering, however, is perhaps not among the skills most frequently ascribed to libraries and library professionals (Jaeger et al. 2013). Beyond these perceptions of where libraries’ skills lie, many professionals may hesitate to advocate politically for fear of repercussions for their institution’s funding, or they may otherwise lack a solid footing to do so because, as Dawkins (2023) illustrates, the content of library policies can vary widely across even a small sample size.

Despite the national-level coordination driving the groups behind the recent wave of book challenges, the literature has relatively little to say about libraries banding together

to counter such challenges. Jaeger et al. explicitly call for “sharing ideas across local and state government jurisdictions” with regard to protecting library funding (2017, 362), emphasizing that libraries’ political opponents are doing just that. More recently, Jennings-Roche calls for a “political communication strategy” to counter pro-censorship messaging (2023, 30).

Yet even the concept of reporting IF challenges at a national level remains a struggle. An estimate from 2018 by the ALA’s OIF places the number of challenges that end up reported to OIF at between 3 and 18 percent of the actual total (LaRue 2018). Additionally, a more recent survey of US library organizations by Bergamasco et al. (2023) found that most respondents did not track challenges independently of the ALA’s collection mechanism. The literature has little to say about why this is the case, although a study of Canadian libraries postulates that a lack of awareness of existing reporting mechanisms is the largest factor in depressed challenge reporting (Nyby et al. 2024, 394). Anecdotally, some facet of underreporting may stem from library staff not feeling that more easily resolved situations warrant being reported either locally or nationally. To address this, the authors reiterate the value of collecting data about these types of challenges to create a more complete picture of the IF landscape and help determine where action and assistance are best mobilized from state and national organizations.

Methodology

In order to learn more about how local library associations respond to IF challenges, the authors developed a short survey that would be delivered via Google Forms:

1. Is there a specific process or procedure in place for helping libraries/ librarians who turn to you when they’re facing book challenges or similar intellectual freedom issues? If yes, please explain the process.
2. Is there a specific process or procedure in place for gathering statistics on book challenges within your library community? If yes, please explain the process.

Each of these questions was formatted as a “yes/ no/ don’t know” multiple-choice question followed by an optional long-answer section for respondents to provide additional context and explanation for their answers. Additionally, a final, optional open-ended question asked respondents if there was anything else they wished to share.

The authors searched for contact information for library associations at the state, territory, and tribal nation levels. Although some library association websites listed a specific contact person, others had only a generic organizational



email address or a web form as a contact point. After the University of Rhode Island Institutional Review Board (IRB) deemed the study to be exempt (IRB number 2034121-1), the researchers used these email addresses and forms to attempt to locate a specific contact person from each association to answer the survey. The researchers sent emails to determine the most appropriate point of contact in April 2023 and then distributed survey invitation emails to confirmed contacts in June, July, and September 2023.

To maintain respondent confidentiality, the authors used US Census regions to refer to states for de-identification purposes. When describing specific responses in this article, respondents will be identified by their specific region, followed by a number based on the order in which they responded to the survey—for example, “West 06” to identify a state from the West US Census Region who was the sixth to respond to the survey.

Results

The authors received responses representing 29 state library associations (SLAs) and one territory library association. Although the authors reached out to state, territory, and tribal nation library associations, no responses were received from tribal nation library association representatives. Non-responding SLAs included 5 states in the Midwest, 6 in the West, and 10 in the South. Table 1 summarizes responses by region.

One state responded twice and provided conflicting information. Because one respondent from that state provided knowledgeable answers that aligned with language on

the association’s website as preserved in the Internet Archive at the time of the response and clearly explained the procedure, the authors opted to include only the response that matched the website in the final reported statistics.

One respondent in the Midwest noted that their SLA did not collect data, but their state’s *school* library association did.

Procedures for Helping Libraries or Librarians

A majority of respondents (63.3 percent) indicated that their library association had a specific process or procedure in place to support libraries or librarians experiencing book challenges or similar intellectual freedom issues. The largest minority of respondents (23.3 percent) said there was no specific process or procedure in place at their SLA, whereas the remaining 13.3 percent of respondents indicated either that their SLA was preparing a process or that there were other routes to pursue when experiencing a challenge (Figure 1). One respondent from the South specified that “there are many groups to go to for support, but no specific process.” Another respondent from the West noted that their organization was “preparing a training for library staff” at public libraries within their area.

The details of those procedures reported to be in place at responding SLAs varied widely. Four organizations stated that they had a form on their website that libraries or librarians could fill out and submit to report an issue, which would then prompt an intellectual freedom committee (IFC) member to reach out to them. Three SLAs said that their process was initiated via emails sent by libraries or librarians. An additional three respondents shared that their state IFC provided a website with resources to those confronting challenges. Two indicated that their SLA initiated the process by reaching out to affected libraries or librarians. In two

Table 1. Responses by Region

	Number of Organizations Contacted	Number of Responses	Response Rate (%)
West	13	7	53.8
Midwest	12	7	58.3
South	17	6	35.2
Northeast	9	9	100
Tribal nations	2	0	0
Island areas/territories	5	1	20
Total	58	30	51.7

Note: The US Census Bureau regions and divisions of the United States include the District of Columbia in Region 3: South.

Is there a specific process or procedure in place for helping libraries/librarians who turn to you...

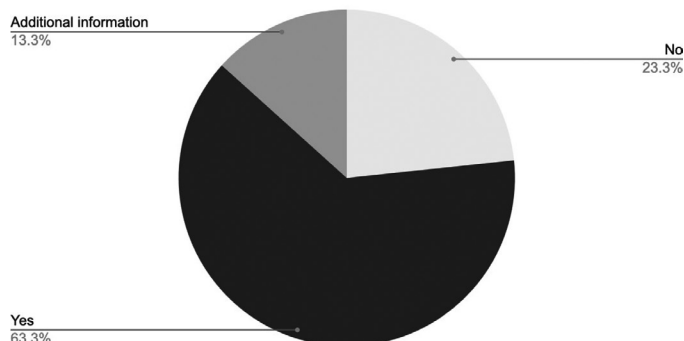


Figure 1. Responses to survey question 1.



cases, librarians noted reporting issues to specific individuals, such as a “designated consultant” or the state-level IFC or state library association’s executive director, rather than to the organization as a whole. One state reported that the IFC shared updates with the membership and reminded the community that they were a resource in the event of challenges.

Most of those who responded that they did not have a system or process in place did not elaborate any further. One Midwestern respondent noted that their association had a form available for anyone affected by a challenge to fill out, but there were “no procedures beyond that.”

Types of Support Offered

The types of support offered varied in response to the specific requests. Midwest 01’s IFC chair would personally connect with those reporting IF challenges. Midwest 04’s response shared that libraries or libraries reporting challenges were provided “a request help form (our hotline) as well as resources, news articles from [Midwest 04], a toolkit, etc.” Another Midwestern respondent shared that assistance “may come in the form of calls or emails of support to the party, assistance with research, policy interpretation, etc.”

A respondent from the West noted that their SLA provided “guidance and some scripting on what to say to patrons if there is a challenge.”

A respondent from the Northeast stated that members of the SLA’s IFC “will communicate with libraries and staff who have received a challenge and will provide support based on the individual needs and circumstance of each incident. This could include guidance and advice for staff, press releases, or library board and staff training.” Another respondent from the Northeast reported that libraries and/or librarians could participate in “an [online] Intellectual Freedom support group that meets monthly.” A respondent from the West also noted virtual meetings for providing support: “After we’ve established contact, we will often set up a time to zoom [sic] meet to get full details of the instance and come up with next steps specific to that particular scenario.”

Procedures for Gathering Statistics on Book Challenges

There was no strong majority of responses to this question. The largest plurality of respondents (40 percent) indicated that there was a specific process or procedure in place at their SLA for gathering statistical data. A nearly equivalent number of respondents (36.7 percent) said their SLA had no specific process or procedure in place. The remaining respondents provided other information instead of a

Is there a specific process or procedure in place for gathering statistics on book challenges...

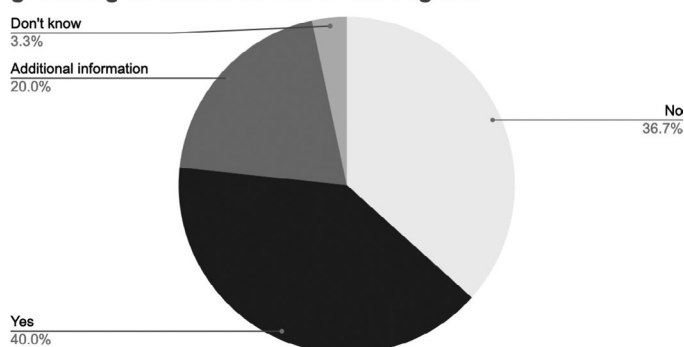


Figure 2. Responses to survey question 2.

clear yes or no (20 percent) or answered “Don’t know” (3.3 percent) (Figure 2).

Four of those who indicated that they had a process for gathering statistics on book challenges reported that they had a challenge-reporting form, whereas three others noted that their data was based on submissions of material review forms. One respondent reported that the IFC “puts data in sheet [sic] for compilation” but did not indicate the origin of such data. Two respondents noted that their state’s libraries would begin formally reporting challenges as part of annual statistics-gathering processes in the next fiscal year.

One respondent from the Northeast noted that “not everyone that is experiencing a challenge reports the issue” and that “many challenges we hear about are by word of mouth.” They also went on to state that their SLA had its own separate process for gathering statistics, so they formed a partnership to “keep each other informed and provide support.” A respondent from the West said that although there is a process for gathering statistics on book challenges, “it’s not very good: I collect emails (and news articles) and at the end of the year tally them up.”

Two of the respondents who reported that their organization had no procedures in place provided additional information about their circumstances: One deferred to the ALA’s OIF for collecting this information, and the other stated that their organization’s procedures were not yet in place.

Responses by Region

Using the de-identified data, the authors analyzed the responses by region. To simplify analysis of narrative responses, the authors counted all “other” responses that noted that there was a process of some sort as a “yes”



Is there a specific process or procedure in place for helping libraries/librarians...

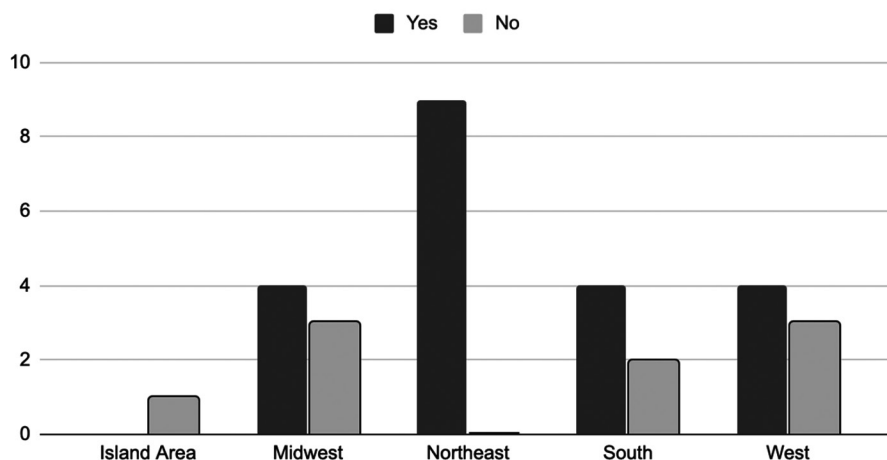


Figure 3. Responses to survey question 1 by region.

response, and all “other” responses that indicated there was no process as a “no.”

As shown in Figure 3, all respondents in the Northeast region indicated that there was a specific process or procedure. Other regions, however, showed less cohesion in having processes or procedures. With the exception of the one island area that responded, responses from other regions showed that half or slightly more than half of the responding states had no processes or procedures.

When asked whether SLAs had specific processes or procedures for gathering statistics on book challenges or similar issues, more representatives in each region responded that there were no such processes (Figure 4). Multiple respondents, however, indicated that their association relied on the ALA to gather that information and share it with the states.

Connections Outside Library Associations

Although there were responses highlighting connections with local school library associations, three SLA representatives in the West indicated that they were in communication with their state libraries or state librarians regarding challenges; another respondent in the Northeast noted their SLA consults with their state’s library board. Two respondents reported that their SLA was working with local chapters of the ACLU; one effort was to provide support for librarians (West 02), and the other (Midwest 04) coordinated to track data.

Inconsistent Use of Challenge-Reporting Tools

Multiple respondents noted that there were reporting tools available to libraries and librarians that would initiate the

process of getting help from SLAs, but a respondent from the Northeast shared a comment echoed in other responses: “Not everyone that is experiencing a challenge reports the issue.” A respondent from the Midwest noted, “Of course, for the data to give an accurate representation of activity in the state, members must feel comfortable and safe, with privacy honored, when providing the information.”

Discussion

The climate in which this data was gathered and the results analyzed, as should be familiar to any professional in the field, was one of drastically increasing challenges to library materials. Writing for NPR, Limbong (2022) pulled results from a study by PEN America, as well as statistics from the ALA, to outline the shift from “individual concerned citizens” as primary materials challengers toward interest groups organized at the state and national levels, generally with ties to conservative political groups. The question this raises, which we have tried to address with this research, is whether there has been a corresponding shift in libraries’ responses from individual library policy to robust support and policy networks at the state and national levels. From the results of our survey, the short answer to this question is no. However, it is worthwhile to examine the ways in which such a shift has failed to manifest so far and to place those failures within a broader context of library advocacy strategies and the profession’s relationship to censors and challenged materials.

Knox (2017, 271) provides a useful framework for this conversation by outlining that libraries responding to



Is there a specific process or procedure in place for gathering statistics on book challenges...

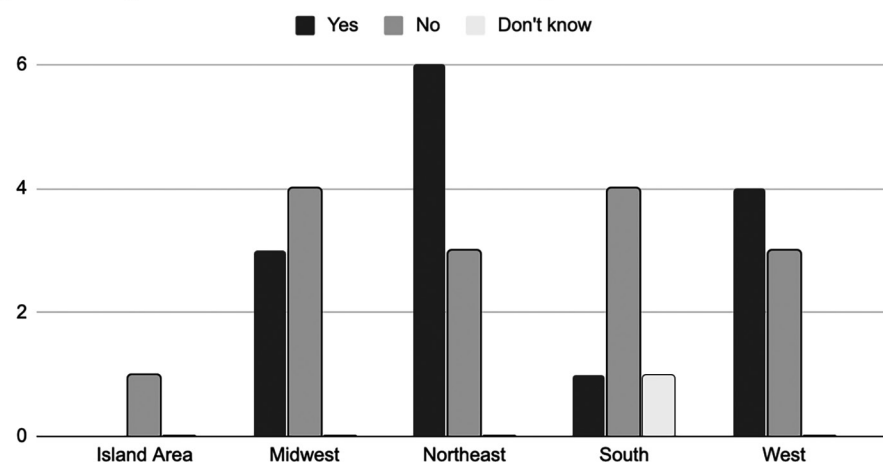


Figure 4. Responses to survey question 2 by region.

censorship should, “First . . . recommit to the principle of supporting intellectual freedom. Second, institutional policies should be reviewed to ensure that they reflect both professional and institutional values. Finally, librarians should know their communities: local, state, and national.” Although separately delineated here, all these principles are intertwined: Policy can serve as an application of recommitment to IF principles, publicized recommitment can serve to inform librarians about the state and national communities available to them, and librarians in touch with their broader communities can craft stronger and more consistent policies across borders.

To begin with, we can address the needed recommitment to the principle of supporting IF. Ratcliffe (2020, 15), in her writing on the historically contingent aspects of IF, places the emergence of this principle in the late 1930s, particularly in relation to its existence at the state or national level. Although the ALA’s Library Bill of Rights (2006), a guiding national-level document on IF commitments, has seen several revisions and updates over its nearly hundred-year life span and is often pointed to by librarians, this does not translate to a broad recommitment to IF principles. In surveying selection policies across the United States, Dawkins (2023, 55) notes, “The lowest rates of inclusion were for the following components . . . Intellectual Freedom documents (27 percent), Intellectual Freedom statement (14 percent), Intellectual Freedom definition (0).” Our own survey echoes these findings, with a pronounced difficulty in even finding specific IF points of contact for many (44 percent) of the library associations. Organizing under this banner seems

like a strong starting point for such a recommitment to the principle of IF, showing that state-level associations are mustering support for their membership. This organization of resources at the state level creates avenues for increased consistency and the ability to recommit at more granular levels, as well as creating a clear pathway for developing messaging and sharing data between associations.

Our second point of discussion is on the place of policy and its reflection of the values held by libraries, particularly in working to understand why a robust support policy has not manifested at a state organization level. This can be seen in the response to our second question, where only 40 percent responded with an unambiguous “yes” that their organization had a procedure in place to collect statistics about challenges to IF in their geographic area. With such a low rate of both affirmation and the clarity of that affirmation among the groups that should be the most focused on these policies, there seems to be a clear disconnect between professional values that enshrine IF as core to what libraries in the twenty-first century stand for and what is written and enacted on the larger macro-level of statewide organizations. Additionally, one can extrapolate outward that individual libraries/ librarians who are not responding on behalf of an organization to a survey specifically about IF practices are even less attuned to what data is, or should be, collected and analyzed at an SLA level and the benefits of that collection and analysis. Clearly written, publicly displayed policies about the scope of data that library associations hope to collect and the value that the data can provide to the support services they want to offer their professional



community serve as a starting point for reifying those values when paired with action. It is important that these policies and the reasoning behind them are communicated not just to library association membership but also to the region's professional community at large, especially to frontline paraprofessionals, who are often those directly encountering challengers.

With the wide variance in data-collection structures, information available to professionals, and response tactics by these associations reported via our survey, it can be difficult to shift into a prescriptive mode to address shortfalls in organizational response. How does one begin to unify and standardize a coordinated response to coordinated challenges when the starting points vary to such a degree? The simplest starting block would appear to be training. Across the 30 responses recorded by our survey, only 3 responding library associations made mention of there being training available to libraries and library workers who were experiencing a challenge. A rapid expansion of standardized training available and extended across the profession, especially to frontline workers, stands as an actionable and immediate response to coordinated attacks on IF. Development of such training by SLAs creates a necessity for examining and working through processes for offering support and collecting data, potentially aiding in closing the gaps between associations. It is worth noting that some state libraries and SLAs need to avoid participation in political activity to avoid a conflict with their nonprofit status, or they may need to avoid an implied connection with the ALA. In these environments, establishing an independent IF committee could foster an environment where those experiencing challenges could report them without requiring the involvement of local professional associations.

The beginnings of this expansion can be seen in the time since this survey was completed, with projects like the OIF's Intellectual Freedom Helpline grant (Stroshane 2024). Proliferation of resources at the more localized state or regional level creates a lower barrier to engagement with IF safeguards for library workers. In turn, this proliferation occurring through a monitored grant process could allow for a higher degree of standardization than fully independently conceived and enacted programs. The ALA's OIF already seems well positioned to oversee such a process, given the frequency with which the ALA's current data-collection efforts were mentioned in the responses to our second survey question.

Limitations

Our efforts to complete this survey were hindered by various challenges throughout the process, limiting the potential scope and applicability of our results.

First and foremost among these limitations was the difficulty we encountered in locating a suitable point of contact for every organization we wished to include in the survey. We were ultimately able to find contact information for only 58 of the 64 entities we initially identified, forcing us to exclude a significant percentage of potential survey recipients from our mailing list. Furthermore, we were only able to identify a general contact email address—rather than an IF-specific point of contact—for 25 of the 58 organizations on our contact list. This was particularly true of the eight island area, territory, and tribal nation library organizations we identified; we were able to locate only one IF-related contact at any of them.

The difference between establishing an IF-specific versus a general contact point had a noticeable effect on the response rate to our survey. Of the 33 IF-specific contacts to which we sent the survey, 23 completed it (69.7 percent). In contrast, a significantly lower percentage of the 25 general contacts completed the survey: 7, representing only 28 percent of the total. Of course, the low overall survey response rate of 51.7 percent represents a significant limitation in its own right. Not receiving data from nearly half of survey recipients—and especially from the 10 IF-focused points of contact who are presumably performing work in this area—hinders the general applicability of our findings.

And as with all survey-based research, our survey questions themselves represent another potential source of limitation for our conclusions. Although ours were written with an intent to be as inclusive as possible with regard to IF processes and procedures, it's possible that this broadness may have confused some survey respondents, leading them to exclude relevant data in their responses. Our findings should be interpreted with this possibility in mind.

Future Research

This study focused solely on establishing whether specific IF procedures have been implemented at library organizations operating at the state, island area, territory, and tribal nation levels and, if so, what procedures are in place. Although some survey responses offered anecdotal insights about why those organizations have their proprietary procedures in place, or why they don't, our results ultimately shed little light on that subject. A more systematic examination of those circumstances by future researchers would provide valuable context on the subject, such as how structural factors like budgetary or political concerns have affected their scope or whether relationships between the ALA and state organizations serve to limit or amplify their reach.

Given the significant disparities in IF procedures reported within the survey results, future researchers should also



consider examining the impacts of whatever procedures are in place on the IF climate, both nationally and locally. For example, do libraries within the constituencies of organizations with more robust IF procedures feel more supported when facing challenges? Future studies may also wish to examine whether or not a relationship exists between strong IF-reporting procedures within a constituency and the frequency of IF challenge reports. Answers to these outstanding questions would go a long way toward establishing a framework of IF best practices for library organizations—a topic that falls beyond the limited scope of our survey.

Although this survey did not explicitly inquire about training for frontline library workers, multiple respondents either mentioned or gave details regarding IF training in their replies to our first survey question. Given this finding, future researchers might also wish to explore this phenomenon in greater detail, particularly in relation to what training is provided, who provides it, and what staff members are encouraged to do when confronted with a challenge.

Lastly, our survey deliberately included only general library organizations operating at the state, island area, territory, and tribal nation levels. Although representatives of school libraries may have participated through their membership in such organizations, no school library-specific associations were among the pool of survey recipients. As such, the results of this survey should not be understood to shed light on any IF procedures in place within school library organizations. Future researchers who are more familiar with that area of the profession may wish to undertake a similar project focused exclusively on that demographic.

Conclusion

This survey and the subsequent analysis offer a snapshot of where libraries stand in the midst of a wave of censorship attempts crashing down on the profession. Although

challenges faced during data collection may limit the applicability of the study's findings, trends nevertheless emerged in the analysis of the gathered data. Most notable of these trends is that while groups attempting to challenge materials are organizing across state lines, the response from libraries shows no such uniformity. This lack of coalescence extends beyond library association responses to challenges and into the reporting mechanisms available to workers. Data collection by library associations was the notable weak point in responses to this survey, with half of the respondents indicating no formal process for gathering statistics within their geographic region.

Another interesting trend within the survey data is the aspect of passivity in the responses from many associations. The majority of replies either stated or suggested that the library associations would offer help only if requested by the library being challenged; only one respondent asserted that there would be some outreach if they were aware of an incident that had not been reported. When coupled with the number of survey responses that indicated no specific procedure for reporting challenges, there is clear potential for a concerning gap into which libraries needing more localized support may fall. More than anything else, then, the results of our survey clearly indicate the need for additional research into the role of library organizations in working to support libraries within the United States, its territories, and the tribal nations on issues pertaining to IF.

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