

# Book Challenges and Collection Development in Academic Libraries

Cindy Hohl, Michael Fernandez, and Rachel E. Scott

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In March, the American Library Association reported a “record number of unique book titles challenged in 2023.”<sup>1</sup> These challenges can have a chilling effect on the work of librarians seeking to collect materials inclusive of human identities, religions, and experiences. The *LRTS* editors asked current American Library Association President Cindy Hohl to consider the intersection of book challenges and collection development in academic libraries.

## ***Editors: What has your experience taught you about the intersection of book challenges and library collections?***

**Hohl:** There is an obvious correlation between targeted book challenges and the attempts to silence voices and erase narratives in this country. Strong communities have strong libraries, and everyone should expect to enjoy their First Amendment rights when visiting a library. Whether researching for educational or enrichment purposes, scholarship and original thought expands through access to a robust print and digital collection. Seeking information to further develop understanding of the world around you can be found in a library, where the only limitations should be your time, collection space of the facility, and, of course, budget for materials. No one library can afford to purchase access to everything in publication and that is the collective power of libraries, we can borrow and lend materials to expand access to users everywhere.

In the days of increased demand to limit access to books, it is especially interesting to see book challenges filed in libraries where the titles being questioned aren't even held in the collection. The behavior behind reporting issues to create confusion is problematic for several reasons and the role of the library is to support readership so everyone can see themselves in stories. The ultimate goal would be for readers to hopefully learn to relate to the characters and the life experiences that are being written about to develop compassion and gain a deeper understanding of the human condition. This lack of respect continues to divide us and supporting our neighbors as human beings worthy of respect should always be the goal.

## ***Editors: For those of us working in academic libraries, book challenges may not be an everyday experience or concern. What lessons could academic librarians learn from public librarians with respect to collection development and resources in a time of increased challenges?***

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**Hohl:** Most libraries of all types have policies for the book challenge process and collection development to encourage the community to read so that everyone has equal access to information. Whether book titles, displays, or programs are being challenged by library users, the library needs to uphold their policies to ensure that inclusive practices are being followed. The library is here to provide access to accurate information from credible sources and we will defend everyone's right to read what they choose. The First Amendment rights of the United States Constitution provide everyone in this country with that freedom, and librarians are here to make sure that we are putting books in the hands of readers and that people can gather safely in libraries without the fear of scrutiny of their decisions.

**Editors:** *One of the most pernicious aspects of book challenges is that it often thrusts public and school library workers into the unexpected/unwanted role of gatekeeper, e.g., second guessing collection decisions out of fear that a particular selection will incur a challenge, with possible career or even (in some states) legal repercussions.<sup>2</sup> Given the current atmosphere, how do library workers advocate for themselves?*

**Hohl:** While censorship attempts and requests for access restrictions are not new, the volume of book challenges in 2024 would be an interesting study in human behavior, and I believe that it reflects a need to increase literacy-based services in the United States. It's a bold statement to accuse librarians of misconduct. To threaten public servants with incarceration and fines because a fellow American wants to check out a book violates our own constitution. In present times, anyone with access to the internet and a device can access information at their fingertips and information professionals are not being asked to monitor any of that digital platform activity directly for individual users. So why is the printed word considered to be so dangerous, and why are surveillance tactics being requested? This is harmful rhetoric against the profession when librarians are being accused of wrongdoing and other falsehoods. Librarians are highly trained and trusted professionals in their communities with many of them earning master's degrees and certificates in library science. To unfoundedly accuse any public servant of wrongdoing is a stain on the community and spreads misinformation. Librarians are also parents, voters, constituents, and taxpayers deserving of respect and recognition for working in collaboration with other service agencies to support the public good. We have to stand up for our rights to defend democracy and that begins with no silenced voices, and everyone being treated with fairness and dignity. Human beings do not need labels placed on them.

**Editors:** *The focus of this issue is diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in library resources and technical services. Given the books most commonly challenged this year, do you have any final thoughts or insights into supporting DEI in our libraries, among our colleagues, and in our communities?*

**Hohl:** Diversity exists in every community and the library should reflect those voices. Programs, services, and materials are provided so that everyone has an equal opportunity to access information in their library and community values are upheld when libraries are being supported. Equitable access is a good thing, and that helps elevate the quality of life for everyone. We should all want to live in

communities where our neighbors have equal opportunities to stay informed and succeed. This is the power of inclusion, and libraries are welcoming spaces where everyone belongs.

## Notes

1. American Library Association, “American Library Association Reports Record Number of Unique Book Titles Challenged in 2023,” press release, March 14, 2024, <https://www.ala.org/news/2024/03/american-library-association-reports-record-number-unique-book-titles>.
2. See, for example, “Students Want New Books. Thanks to Restrictions, Librarians Can’t Buy Them,” *Washington Post*, January 22, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2023/01/22/students-want-new-books-thanks-restrictions-librarians-cant-buy-them/>.