

October 2021 Tuesday Topic

Beyond Banned Books Week: Preparing for Challenges to Library Services

Welcome to Tuesday Topics, a monthly series covering topics with intellectual freedom implications for libraries of all types. Each message is prepared by a member of OLA's Intellectual Freedom Committee or a guest writer. Questions can be directed to the author of the topic or to the IFC Committee.



Beyond Banned Books Week: Preparing for Challenges to Library Services

Libraries across the country just finished recognizing Banned Books Week at the end of September. It is a great time to highlight issues of censorship in public spaces, and to educate ourselves, our colleagues, and our communities about the value of free access to ideas and information.

Thanks to ongoing advocacy efforts like Banned Books Week, most librarians are now familiar with the American Library Association's (ALA) lists of [frequently challenged books](#), and when it comes to policies and procedures regarding requests to remove library materials, [resources](#) are increasingly [easy to find](#).

But when Banned Books Week ends, it is clear that conversations about censorship in libraries must continue, given the rise of another troubling trend—a rise in challenges against library events and programs, including story times, displays, and author visits.

The Oregon Intellectual Freedom Clearinghouse reported 17 challenges to library materials, and 6 challenges to library services during the [2020-2021 service year](#). In an interesting swap, challenges to library materials actually declined slightly between the 2020 and 2021 reports—while challenges to library services increased threefold.

Reports of challenges to library services and materials, 2017-2021

Data provided by the Oregon Intellectual Freedom Clearinghouse

Year	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Library Service Challenges	Not reported	1	6	2	6
Materials Challenges	20	22	43	19	17

Of the six reported challenges to library services in 2021, one library reported challenges in regard to the materials and content surrounding an upcoming author visit:

One library, in partnership with other area libraries, invited YA authors Jason Reynolds and Jenny Torres Sanchez to speak. In advance of their visit, the library bought copies of these author's books to give to interested students or teachers. The library received an anonymous phone message from a man who identified himself only as "a local educator," upset that the library was "promoting harmful ideas: (1) that racism actually exists in America" and "(2) that Americans should be sympathetic toward immigrants coming from south of the border when our country is already overrun with immigrants." Library staff discussed with school district staff involved in the program, and the program continued.

Of the other five challenges to library services in the 2021 report, two challenges centered around objections to LGBTQ+ themes in library story times, and one library reported two challenges to a teen Dungeons and Dragons program, citing "significant spiritual implications from the satanic realm."

What do I do if someone challenges an author visit, or any other service at my library?

Just as librarians have been trained to frequently review and update their collection development policies with materials challenges in mind, it is now recommended that libraries have clear policies in place surrounding the selection and development of library-sponsored programs, events, and displays.

If you are preparing to draft a policy of your own, the American Library Association has released [multiple interpretations of the Library Bill of Rights](#) as they pertain to different aspects of library materials and services—including an interpretation when considering [Library-Initiated Programs and Displays as a Resource](#). As it pertains to controversial speakers and topics, the guidance in the document is clear, and follows the same rigorous principles libraries already apply to the reconsideration of library materials:

1. "Concerns, questions, or complaints about library-initiated programs and displays are handled according to the same written policy and procedures that govern reconsiderations of other library sources."

2. “Programs should not be canceled because of the ideas or topics of the program or the views expressed by participants or speakers, nor should library workers censor or remove displays because someone may disagree with content.”

In direct response to a rise in challenges to library programs and library-sponsored guest speakers, the ALA also released a [detailed Q&A document in 2018](#). In it, the ALA advises librarians to consider the chilling impacts of canceling events or disinviting speakers in direct response to complaints or controversy, warning that

Canceling a speaker, program, or event because of real or anticipated controversy could negatively impact the reputation of the library and its ability to serve the community as a forum for the exchange of ideas.

If you are worried about challenges to future programs, or facing a challenge of your own, it is important to remember to reach out for professional support. The OLA’s intellectual freedom committee offers professional support and guidance, and can be reached by emailing co-chairs Perry Stokes and Emily O’Neal at ifc.chair@olaweb.org or by emailing all committee members at ifc.members@olaweb.org.

Finally, if we want to continue to accurately track these trends, it is important that, in addition to materials, library staff members also report challenges to library services, programming, and events when they occur. The State Library of Oregon’s Intellectual Freedom Clearinghouse [maintains a form for reporting all types of challenges](#) at schools and libraries. Reports can be made anonymously, and interested library workers can use the reporting form to seek support and guidance from the State Library and [OLA’s Intellectual Freedom Committee](#), as well as connect with peers who have navigated similar experiences across the state.

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