

Survey Confirms Strong Support for Intellectual Freedom in Public Collection Development Librarians

Oltmann, S. M. (2019). Important Factors in Midwestern Public Librarians' Views on Intellectual Freedom and Collection Development: Part 1. *The Library Quarterly*, 89(1), 2-15. <https://doi.org/10.1086/700659>

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Evidence Summary

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A Review of:

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Abstract

Objective – The article sought to explore whether librarian attitudes regarding intellectual freedom conform to the stance of the American Library Association (ALA).

Design – Electronic survey.

Setting – Public libraries in the Midwestern United States.

Subjects – Subjects were 645 collection development library professionals employed in public libraries.

Methods – An electronic survey was distributed to public library directors in nine Midwestern states and was completed by the library professional primarily responsible for collection development. The survey focused on community information and probed the participants for their stances on several intellectual freedom topics.

Main Results – The survey was sent to 3,018 participants via each state's librarian and had a response rate of 21.37%. The first section of the survey focused on broad strokes statements representing the ALA's stance on intellectual freedom for public libraries. The results

revealed widespread agreement on these issues. More than 88% of participants agreed with statements like “public libraries should provide their clients with access to information from a variety of sources.” Despite strong agreement among participants, particular demographic characteristics were more likely to lead to disagreement with all statements including working in rural communities and not holding a master’s degree in library science.

The next section of the survey focused on how strongly participants’ personal beliefs conformed to the intellectual freedom statements in the ALA’s Library Code of Ethics. Again, there was widespread agreement, with 94.9% of participants indicating that they agreed with the statement “we uphold the principles of intellectual freedom and resist all efforts to censor library materials.” Only one participant disagreed with the statement “it is the right of every individual to both seek and receive information from all points of view without restriction.” When asked whether the ALA’s stance on intellectual freedom ever conflicted with their personal beliefs, 39.8% of participants indicated that it did, 22% were unsure, and 40% had never experienced conflict. Participants holding a master’s degree in library science and librarians in large cities were less likely to experience conflict between their personal beliefs and the ALA’s stance on intellectual freedom. In the free text comments, several participants indicated that they experienced conflict when the ALA’s stance did not reflect their personal beliefs or community values.

Conclusion – While the overwhelming majority of respondents indicated that they agreed with the ALA’s stance on intellectual freedom, a minority of participants experienced some conflict. Respondents indicated that personal belief could create conflict when librarians committed to intellectual freedom were required to make choices in their professional work that conflicted with their own views. Conflict could also arise when collection choices made to

support intellectual freedom were not supported by patrons in the community.

Commentary

This article is the first in a two-part series focusing on the impact of intellectual freedom on collection development. It is loosely based on a 1972 article (Busha, 1972) which found that librarians supported ideas of intellectual freedom but were less likely to apply those ideas in the context of censorship pressures. Oltmann’s findings in part one reflect the first of Busha’s findings and the second part of Oltmann’s article will explore the application of intellectual freedom ideas on collection development practice. Issues of intellectual freedom are particularly relevant in the current U.S. political climate and this article suggests that the attitudes around intellectual freedom have not meaningfully wavered in Midwestern librarians.

When examined through the Glynn Critical Appraisal Tool (2006), this article represents a large sample of Midwestern librarians, but it may not equally represent librarian perspectives across the Midwest. The participant pool was drawn from library director contact information supplied by state librarians rather than through professional networks, so the participant pool is likely free of investigator bias, but the response rate varied by state from 5.2%-22.5%. The response rate varied enough by state that state-by-state analysis was not conducted, though there was enough representation in the other demographic categories for analysis. One of the more interesting demographic characteristics examined was whether participants held a master’s degree in library science. Slightly fewer than half of participants (48.3%) did not hold a degree and that characteristic was significantly associated with a greater tendency to disagree with intellectual freedom statements. Participants from rural areas were also more likely to disagree with the statements, but this may be due to the community conflicts explored in the free text analysis section.

Statements for the survey were drawn from official ALA documentation on intellectual freedom and the survey tool was also used in Oltmann's 2016 study, limited to public librarians in Ohio. This study found similar results reflecting librarian approval of intellectual freedom practices in collection development. Through this larger-scale project, Oltmann has made a convincing case that librarians still strongly support ideals of intellectual freedom as defined by the ALA. The second part of this article will explore whether librarians apply these views in collection development.

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