FEATURE

Preparing for the Worst but Hoping for the Best

Censorship, Academic Libraries, and Reconsideration Policies

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Libraries in the United States have received the highest number of book challenges on record in recent years. Although the vast majority of these challenges happened at school or public libraries, we sought to assess how academic libraries are prepared to face such challenges, especially with the rise of state laws seeking to limit what subjects can be taught. To answer this question, we analyzed American members of the Association of Research Libraries' reconsideration policies. Our analysis found that a minority of these libraries had a reconsideration policy. These policies varied in how they framed the potential challenge and the procedure to handle a removal request. The messages within these documents were mixed, often obscuring the actual policy. They relied on justifications, typically citing the purpose of an academic library and/or ethical statements from professional bodies, and they borrowed language from other institutions' policies. We conclude with recommendations for creating a reconsideration policy tailored for academic libraries.

> If this nation is to be wise as well as strong, if we are to achieve our destiny, then we need more new ideas for more wise men reading more good books in more public libraries. These libraries should be open to all—except the censor.
>
> —John F. Kennedy (handset and printed at the Center for the Book with moveable foundry type on a platen press built in 1888)

When we think of libraries, we might think of books, the physical space, a repository of democratic knowledge, or librarians ready to help patrons. But there is another narrative not always at the forefront of the imagination—one where libraries are, for better or for worse, evolving representations of contemporary political moments. This more nuanced and complicated narrative might get bypassed, in part, by what Fobazi Ettarh calls "vocational awe," or "the set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that result in the beliefs that libraries as institutions are inherently good and sacred, and therefore beyond critique."[1] As Matthew Battles explores in *Library: An Unquiet History*, the history of libraries is rife with "points of transformations,

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those moments where readers, authors, and librarians question the meaning of the library itself."[2] The library as an ideological institution has continually shifted in its notions of what knowledge means, who has access to it, and what users' and librarians' relationship to a library's information should be.

In 2023, US libraries received the highest number of book and resource challenges ever recorded in a calendar year.[3] Although 98 percent of these challenges targeted materials in schools or public libraries, there is concern that this trend will continue to grow. During the 2022 Charleston Conference "Long Arm of the Law" session, the director of the American Library Association (ALA)'s Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF), Deborah Caldwell-Stone, predicted that book banning efforts are likely to extend to academic libraries because of "divisive concepts laws."[4] These laws stem from an executive order from President Donald Trump's first term and prohibit information or teaching about race, racism, gender, and sexuality. This order, although overturned by President Biden, was the catalyst for state laws to come that would change higher education as we know it. Texas's ban on diversity, equity, and inclusion programs in Texas public colleges and universities (Senate Bill 17), for example, eliminated 311 Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion positions and at least sixty-nine staffers, which "most impacted women and people of color."[5] The implications for academic libraries in states with such laws can be severe when we consider libraries as spaces that acquire and provide access to information on all topics, including those now prohibited.

We recognize the current predicament libraries are facing, with increasing challenges to books and resources coupled with restrictive state laws, as one of Battles' "points of transformation" for American libraries. Pekoll defines a challenge as "An attempt to to [*sic*] have a library resource removed or access to it restricted, based on the objections of a person or group. Challenges do not simply involve a person expressing a point of view; rather they are an attempt to remove material from the curriculum or library, thereby restricting the access of others."[6] The impetus for a challenge, however, can be for many reasons, such as moral arguments, political motivations, outdated or incorrect information, or harmful content.

Reconsideration policies establish processes for reviewing collection material challenges in the context of a library's guiding principles, intellectual freedom, and users' right to information. According to the ALA, all public, school, and academic libraries should have a reconsideration policy to handle library resource objections.[7] We assert that reconsideration policies can serve as a reminder that the resources we have (or do not) are tied (or could be tied) to various political and social moments, and that library users have many reasons they may take issue with library resources. Drafting these policies allows libraries to consider how their collections were developed, and in what contexts, before attempting to communicate with users about the complex work of building academic library collections and how librarians and users relate to them. Enacting these policies provides libraries with a systematic, thoughtful space to have this communication and can demonstrate both a willingness to be open about the nature of our work and to build and maintain good relationships with our users.

Our research team considered the OIF director's statement at the Charleston Conference as a call to action to investigate academic library preparedness to field material challenges by examining

reconsideration policies from American members of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL). As a study population, ARL libraries are highly resourced, large, mainly academic institutions. Although they may not be current targets of censorship efforts, ARL libraries cannot be considered exempt from the threat of collection challenges. Indeed, ARL's support of statements related to recent challenges to academic freedom demonstrates the need for ongoing advocacy in protecting library values and the rights of information users.[8] For this study, we first investigated how many of these libraries had reconsideration policies and then performed a content analysis of those policies to assess preparedness for resource challenges. We discuss our findings in relation to both professional guidance from ALA and ideas of conflict and relationship management. In this article, we use "challenge" interchangeably with "reconsideration request," a phrase commonly used to describe library resource challenges in the library profession.

Literature Review

Recent changes to the US legal landscape open the possibility for more serious challenges to academic library collections. In September 2020, President Trump signed the executive order "Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping," which introduced the idea of "divisive concepts" into political discourse.[9] This executive order effectively prohibited the provision of information or training about concepts such as race or racism, gender identity, sexuality, and sexism in public or government-funded institutions and agencies.[10] Although this initial executive order was revoked by President Joe Biden's executive order "Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government," it kickstarted a cascade of bills that aim to ban divisive concepts in various capacities at the state level.[11] Continued polarization around "divisive concepts" prior to the 2024 presidential election suggests that divisive concepts legislation is likely to remain in practice at the state and/or national levels.[12]

Since 2021, the nonprofit PEN America (an international literary and human rights organization) has maintained a database of state-level bills, laws, and executive orders that qualify as "educational gag orders." These constrain what can be taught—often related to race, gender, or sexuality—or otherwise stipulate limits around the activities of public educational institutions and occasionally private educational institutions that receive state money. The vast majority of legislative records in the dataset aim to limit teaching or exposure to divisive concepts in education, though a small minority fall outside of this scope.[13] As of April 4, 2024, this database indicates that 126 educational gag orders that target higher education have been introduced as bills since 2021, with twelve passed into law and twenty-eight pending. Of the forty-three bills addressing other aspects of higher education (e.g., eliminating tenure, limiting an institution's ability to formally adopt a specific position on an issue), nine have passed into law and twenty are pending. Three state-level executive orders include higher education in their scope.[14] Recent survey research by Pokornowski and Schonfeld finds that library leaders in states that have advanced or passed divisive concepts legislation have not experienced direct censorship of library content or collections.[15] These library leaders, however, have felt indirect impacts from legislation and

the surrounding political environment that is changing collections practices. Impacts are also being noticed in library functions outside of collections, such as hiring and retention.[16]

Although none of the current bills or laws gathered by PEN explicitly mention library collections in higher education institutions, academic libraries are certainly not exempt. Jefferson and Dziedzic-Elliott outline two 2014 instances that set a precedent for state funding cuts to public colleges due to the selection of library materials.[17] The College of Charleston and the University of South Carolina-Upstate libraries received legislative budget cuts of $52,000 and $14,000, respectively, following political opposition to campus read program book selections with LGBTQ+ themes. This precedent, combined with the flurry of divisive concepts legislation and ongoing volatility in political discourse, underscores the idea that academic libraries would be wise to prepare for potential challenges to collection materials in the future.

Data on book and resource challenges in academic libraries in the United States are sparse. ALA's censorship data indicate that 1,247 documented library book and resource challenges were reported to the OIF in 2023.[18] Through direct correspondence with the OIF, we learned that the number of material challenges for academic libraries specifically was eleven (0.01 percent), with only four (0.003 percent) of these involving books or graphic novels.[19] The scholarly literature addressing book and resource challenges in academic libraries is also relatively scant. The majority of relevant studies used survey methodology to assess the frequency of material challenges and the presence of associated policies.[20] One limitation of survey studies is that respondents are self-selecting, meaning that individuals who complete a survey about library collection challenges and policies may be more likely to have recent interest or experience in this area; thus it is difficult to make conclusions about the results since they could reflect inherent biases. Studies also did not always indicate if they controlled for institution, meaning multiple respondents could have completed surveys from the same institution, potentially adding duplicity to results. Regardless, these studies present a useful foundation for understanding the history of collection challenges and policies in academic libraries.

There is substantial variance in the respondent populations of the survey studies that may impact results as well—in quantity, geographic scope, type of library, and respondent job classification—all of which create unique contexts for collection challenges. Several study populations include institutions outside the United States, where the political climate differs substantially. Schrader et al. looks solely at Canadian academic libraries, Hippenhammer is confined to the United States and Canada, and Matacio has a global scope.[21] Hippenhammer and Matacio focus on private religious higher education institutions where the context and goals for library collection management differ from nondenominational institutions.[22] Bukoff targets smaller US college academic libraries, which often have different objectives and management strategies than libraries at large academic institutions that may more strongly emphasize collection preservation.[23] Separate studies—one by Oltmann and Seigel and one by Newton—focus on US academic libraries in general.[24] Although Vredegoogd does not specify a geographic focus, their discussion implies a relative US range of interest among academic libraries of a broad scope and is framed through the US political context and increase in book bans.[25] Most

studies either allowed anyone to respond or sought a single response from an institution but did not specify a professional role for the respondent, with Matacio and Oltmann being the major exception.[26] They surveyed administrators, who often have different perspectives and knowledge than frontline employees directly fielding patron questions.

The data from these studies do not have any clear consensus around frequency of library material challenges or presence of specific policies for handling collection challenges within or across different variables in respondent populations. The range of respondents across studies that indicated experiencing collection challenges during the study periods is 16 percent to 48.4 percent, and the range of institutions indicating that they had either a standalone challenge policy or challenge language within a written collection development policy is 15 percent to 62 percent. Comparison is complicated by wide variance in survey design, study population, and years covered. Looking at the presence of challenge policies from another angle, Tokarz conducted a content analysis of Carnegie Research 1 (R1) library collection development policies on public websites, where 28.7 percent were found to include specific language addressing collection challenges or intellectual freedom, squarely within the range from the aforementioned studies above, with 10 percent specifying that they do not remove or restrict collection materials and 7 percent explicitly indicating that the library accepts challenge or reconsideration requests.[27]

In an interesting commonality, several studies found that even when written policies exist, academic libraries only reported adhering to them when responding to some collection challenges.[28] Hippenhammer found that removal of collection materials is more likely when a policy is not followed and even more likely when no policy exists at all, underscoring the importance of creating and following appropriate policies for fielding collection reconsideration requests.[29]

The authors of many of these studies felt that collection challenges are an important issue, yet their findings suggest many libraries are unprepared to respond to them effectively. With unfortunate foresight, Schrader et al., on the basis of the data gathered through their study, expressed that censorship is a real threat to academic libraries.[30] Many concluded with a strong call for libraries to adopt or update written policies and reconsideration forms to prepare for handling censorship challenges.[31] Hippenhammer was the first to recommend a specific challenge procedure and reconsideration form more than thirty years ago, but work in this area is slow to continue. In 2024, Ferguson led a professional workshop to address this issue, supporting a largely academic librarian audience in creating effective reconsideration policies for their institutions.[32] Even when prepared with policy documentation, however, collection challenges in academic libraries can be jarring. Podrygula describes how librarians at a public university in North Dakota were surprised to receive a challenge, because even though they had a strong reconsideration policy and form in place, they assumed intellectual and academic freedom principles would preclude someone from making a reconsideration request.[33]

One piece missing from the literature is information about practices in academic libraries for reporting challenges to ALA's OIF, which has maintained a database documenting censorship attempts since 1990

and has an online reporting form.[34] It is possible that censorship challenges occur in academic libraries but that they may not be documented or reported. This possibility is supported by Oltmann, who found that some survey respondents said "they would not seriously consider a challenge to their collection" should one arise.[35] A survey respondent in Pokornowski and Schonfeld's research noted that they view resource challenges as minor issues and would point to more generalized academic freedom policies if necessary.[36] Most libraries reportedly also lack staff training on intellectual freedom and handling book and material challenges, which may include a lack of staff knowledge about censorship reporting norms, whether a reconsideration policy is in place or not.[37] Siegel and Newton specifically call on academic librarians to share challenge information with the OIF to ensure the compilation of accurate statistics so the field can clearly understand the reality of the current landscape of library collection challenges in higher education institutions.[38]

Methods

Research Questions and Sample

To assess ARL academic library preparedness to respond to potential resource challenges, our research team at the University of New Mexico (UNM) sought to answer three main questions:

- How many ARL libraries have reconsideration policies in place or in progress?
- What content do ARL library reconsideration policies contain?
- How do ARL libraries' reconsideration policies align with established standards?

ARL is a member-based nonprofit composed of the leading research libraries in the United States and Canada, including university, government, and independent institutional libraries. We selected ARL academic libraries in the United States as our study population for several reasons. UNM is an ARL institution, and we were interested in evaluating our peer academic libraries' preparedness for resource challenges. We were also interested in exploring how research libraries, a group that typically maintains very large library collections to meet the complex information needs of strong research communities, address challenges given the relatively small amount of recent scholarship on the topic. We focused on academic ARL member libraries in the United States specifically to explore preparedness given the country's evident rise in book challenges since 2022. In total, 103 institutions met these parameters for inclusion in our study.

Search Protocol

Our group developed a list of search terms and a search protocol to evaluate the ARL library websites in our sample for reconsideration policy information. Our full research group conducted an initial test of ten ARL libraries to trial and standardize our search protocol. We then worked in pairs to review the remaining ARL institutions and normalized our findings as a full group. The process, which took place in July 2023, began with browsing each library's webpage to locate information that might be easily found on the homepage, about or information pages, policy or guideline pages, collections information pages, and/or site map. If a policy was not located, the following terms were used in individual searches

of the library's FAQ: "reconsideration," "withdraw," "challenge," "take down," "intellectual freedom," "policies," "guidelines," and "collections." Next, the library's webpage search (or if search was not available for the library website, university website search box) was used with term "library" added to all the searches except "intellectual freedom." As a final attempt, we performed private-mode Google searches using the name of the university, the word "library," and each of the words: "reconsideration," "withdraw," and "challenge." If we still did not find a reconsideration policy on an institution's website, a group member sent a direct email to a collections library worker at that institution to ask if they had a policy; all email responses were recorded.

To scope our research, we determined what minimally constitutes a reconsideration policy. We identified a policy when it specifically included either a procedure or a rule for collection challenges. For procedures, this could take the form of a multistep process, or it could be as simple as providing an email contact for reconsideration requests. Rules were when a library clearly stated that they do not remove items from their collection when challenged. We did not include policies that only stated a broad stance on intellectual freedom, were related to routine deaccessioning or library-led withdrawal, special collections donor policies, gift policies, information on Banned Book Week, or general collections policies unless these also included information on reconsideration or challenges. We also did not include policies addressing peripheral issues, such as takedown policies and harmful language statements, which often turned up in our search protocol due to shared vocabulary.

We included draft reconsideration policies sent in response to the direct inquiry emails mentioned above in our dataset, as these draft policies are a clear commitment from institutions to establish an official policy. The draft policies we identified were in various stages of development but had not yet been adopted as official policy or included on public websites, so we offered to keep draft policies anonymous to encourage submission of incomplete policies. We also included UNM's own draft reconsideration policy in our analysis. Our analysis and findings are based on policies accessed in fall 2023, and we acknowledge that both draft and public policies may have changed since we collected our research sample.

Policy Content Analysis

We conducted an initial review of the identified policies. The review categories were close-ended questions based in part on the ALA *Intellectual Freedom Manual* "Policy Checklist—Reconsideration of Challenged Resources" recommendations and the ALA "Selection & Reconsideration Policy Toolkit for Public, School, & Academic Libraries."[39] The following questions guided our review:

1. Does the policy allow reconsideration of materials?
2. Is a procedure described?
3. Is there a reconsideration form?
4. Are guiding documents referenced?
5. Is there a date?

Asking the preceding questions allowed us to determine levels of alignment between extant policies and best practices described in both the manual and the toolkit. Question No. 1 functioned as an inclusion criterion; if a rule or process was described, then we could treat the statement as a reconsideration policy and proceed with the following questions. Question No. 2 was informed by guidance in both texts to outline a clear procedure that stated how users can make a reconsideration request and what would happen after a request was made. Question No. 3 captured whether libraries provided a form for users to make requests. Professional guidance suggests the use of a form to collect consistent information. Question No. 4 allowed us to record what outside documentation or statements libraries used to give context to the reconsideration process, as suggested. For Question No. 5, the manual states that selection policies should include information on how often they are reviewed. Although this guidance is not specifically mentioned for reconsideration policies, our group was interested in analyzing how many of the reconsideration policies found had date information for two reasons. First, this is in line with the best practice mentioned in relation to other collections policies above; community members have context for how recent these policies are and when they might be revisited and possibly revised. Second, we wanted to know how many reconsideration policies were developed very recently, perhaps in response to the national increase in resource challenges.

We conducted a close reading and analysis of each document instead of formally coding due to the small number of reconsideration policies identified through our protocol ($N = 21$) and their short length. Brummett defines close reading as "the mindful, disciplined reading of an object with a view to deeper understanding of its meanings."[40] Following Paul and Elder's fundamentals of close reading, we took note of the important ideas of the reconsideration policies.[41] Keeping in mind our purpose to examine reconsideration policies in the current moment, we "read in different ways in different situations for different purposes" to grasp the themes betwixt and between the different policies and put this in conversation with "the author's purpose of writing," in this case academic libraries and their proactive response to library resource challenges.[42] The policies varied in length, from a few sentences to more than a page. We organized our analysis based on the categories detailed above from our initial quick review and fleshed them out. Two members of the research team reviewed each document separately. They then met to discuss each policy and come to consensus on what stood out, noting themes or anything of interest along the way.

Results

Summary Findings

Our final sample included twenty-one reconsideration policies, representing only 20 percent of academic ARL libraries in the United States. Of these, sixteen (76 percent) were standalone policies and five (24 percent) were part of a broader collection policy document. We identified sixteen reconsideration policies using our initial search protocol. We also included UNM's own draft policy. We then emailed the remaining eighty-six institutions seeking reconsideration policies due to our inability to find them on public websites. We received fifty responses from librarians saying their institution

does not have a policy, and thirty-two did not reply after two attempts at contact. Two institutions sent formal policies that we did not identify with our search methodology, and two more sent draft policies in development. A summary of the quantitative findings relative to the quick review categories detailed in our methods is available in figure 1.

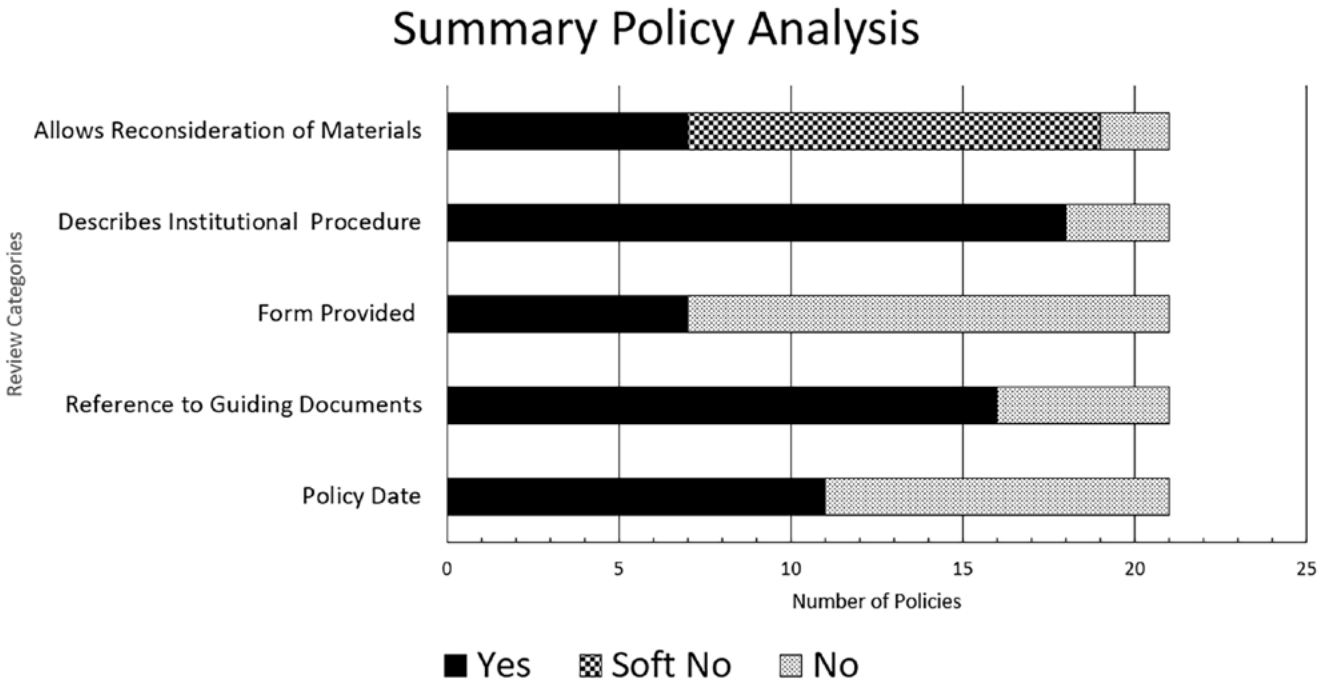

Figure 1. Summary policy analysis: Key elements of the ALA Intellectual Freedom Manual's "Policy Checklist—Reconsideration of Challenged Resources."

Only seven policies (33 percent) directly stated that they allow reconsideration of materials, and two policies (10 percent) expressed a clear rejection of reconsideration. The twelve remaining policies (57 percent) expressed what our team categorized as a "Soft No," which we discuss in detail below. Nearly all policies (eighteen, 86 percent) described a clear institutional procedure for handling reconsideration requests or challenges, but only seven provided a public form for requests. A strong majority (sixteen, 76 percent) of the policies we analyzed mentioned or link out to guiding documents that informed their decision-making. These included internal collection policies, library or university mission statements, and policies from ALA and the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), which are further explored in the "Supporting Statements" section below. Of the eleven policies we analyzed with dates present (52 percent), six were created or revised since 2022, which follows the recent upward national trend in resource challenges. The proportion of public and private institutions that had reconsideration policies was similar.

Broadly, the policies in our research sample exhibited high variation in content and structure, although there are a number of relatively standard elements and themes. The remainder of our results address the close read portion of our analysis, where we explore the emergent themes from the policy

documents in our research sample. These themes are informed by our review categories, but they primarily highlight nuances and points of confusion across policies.

Policy Framing

The theme "Policy Framing" speaks to the different reasons institutions expressed for anticipated challenges to resources. Many policies had preambles that included context they felt necessary to justify their policy (more on this in "Reliance on Justifications" theme). These preambles often included speculation about who might make a challenge (e.g., producers, donors, faculty) and why (e.g., triviality of the work, offensiveness, erroneous conclusions, defamatory content, misstatement of facts, censorship).

There was a spectrum as to how these policies framed a potential challenge. At one end were policies that anticipated challenges due to censorship (i.e., a desire to control what other people access). For example, this title from a draft policy makes explicit the sort of challenges they expected: "Censorship and Intellectual Freedom Challenges." Policies on this end of the spectrum often mentioned censorship, conferring with legal counsel, or used anti-censorship or intellectual freedom supporting statements from professional organizations. These policies often focused exclusively on censorship as the reason for the challenge.

At the other end of the spectrum were policies that framed challenges as due to a problem with the information itself (e.g., outdated information, erroneous content, poor scholarship). The following title is an excellent example of this: "Request for Removal of Materials from the Collections or from General Circulation Due to Allegations of Dubious Scholarship."[43] Policies like this often listed several reasons why something might be challenged. Pejorative or offensive content might be included in the list, but the emphasis of the whole statement was more on the quality of information. For example, the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign's (UIUC) policy stated that materials will not be "withdrawn from the collections based on allegations of false, misleading, pejorative, or potentially harmful information."[44] As another example, Northwestern University's policy focused on the producers or owners of the information who might make challenges rather than a general audience—"authors, creators, or collectors"—and acknowledged that they may "misstate facts, reach erroneous conclusions, or make claims that may . . . be hurtful to individuals or lead future researchers astray."[45] Moreover, they asserted that libraries are not fact checkers for their content but may "correct known errors issued by publishers."[46]

Some policies fell in between these two and read more objectively in that they did not prescribe a specific reason for the anticipated challenge. For example, the University of Connecticut mentioned their commitment to intellectual freedom, but the rest of their policy was devoted to explaining their procedure.[47]

Mixed Messages

Many of these policies were not straightforward or easy to understand, hence the "mixed messages" theme. This theme has two subparts: (1) the Soft No and (2) the non-endorsement.

The Soft No

All the policies we reviewed resisted resource removal; no policy enthusiastically invited the community to challenge collection materials. Collection policies or guidelines that explicitly expressed they would not consider requests to remove material were categorized as "No Reconsiderations." There were only two clear No Reconsiderations policies: University of Georgia[48] and Virginia Tech.[49] From the University of Georgia's policy: "The UGA Libraries do not remove, at the request of an individual or group, material which has been selected for the collection according to criteria in the Libraries' stated collection policies."[50] By contrast, some policies clearly allowed reconsiderations. Brigham Young University (BYU), for example, concisely explained why their collection may contain items their community might object to and then provided a reconsideration form.[51]

But within the language around resistance to resource removal, some policies were more straightforward than others about whether they allowed reconsideration requests. This dynamic led to some policies that straddled statements that material would not be removed or withdrawn with a clause that then offered recourse for challenging material. We classified such porous policies as a "Soft No." These read like a No Reconsiderations at first glance, but upon closer inspection, they left wiggle room for a reconsideration request to be made. Soft No policies often presented strong language against removing items or entertaining reconsideration requests, but they still provided a way for someone to make a challenge.

Soft Nos made up the majority of policies. These policies would say something like "most requests will be declined," or they would consider opinions but will "never" remove something by request; however, they then provided a reconsideration form or an email contact and laid out a procedure for managing reconsideration requests. Tulane Libraries, for example, "do not routinely add or withdraw, at the request of any individual or group, material selected for the collections."[52] The "routinely" puts this statement into the Soft No category.

Other policies included a sentence about adding a note to the item or the record: We will not remove the item, but we will add a note. The University of Florida provided a good example: "The Smathers Libraries may choose to document the perceived problem . . . in the catalog record and possibly also in or on the item itself."[53] UIUC stated that they will not withdraw items from the collection "based on allegations of false, misleading, pejorative, or potentially harmful information."[54] They go on to say that there may be "specific challenges of merit" and give a procedure. They do not elaborate what might constitute "merit." Northwestern similarly stated they will not withdraw an item: "Our policy is that materials acquired by the Libraries stand as published."[55] In the next sentence, however, they stated that they "have created a process to engage in a dialogue around the immediacy of access to potentially harmful collections" and urged patrons to contact them if they "encounter images, language, or other

content [they] consider harmful, offensive, or inappropriate."[56] They did not explain the goal of this dialogue, though. The phrase "immediacy of access" hints at an access restriction of some kind in place of resource removal.

The Non-Endorsement

Non-endorsement clauses were also common among our sample. In this case, "non-endorsement" means that inclusion of an item in the collections did not constitute an endorsement of those ideas by the library or institution, for example, "Appearance of a resource in the collections or on display in the library environment does not necessarily mean that the Libraries advocate or endorse the ideas or statements found in that resource."[57] Although this makes sense to librarians and is included in the ALA "Freedom to Read Statement," it might be unclear for the community. Because the community might think of libraries as spaces of democratic knowledge that lie outside of critique, a statement like this might be interpreted in different ways. To patrons, it might seem like librarians choose the books and then cede responsibility for them when they are in the library. A disclaimer like this may have been intended to educate patrons about the paradoxical relationship of libraries to their books: Although librarians actively build collections, they are not responsible for the ideas the collections hold. Some of our materials may be viewed as problematic, but we keep them for a variety of reasons. To do otherwise would be censorship.

Reliance on Justifications

Many of the policies had long preambles that made it difficult to understand their actual stance on collection reconsideration. These preambles were the justifications or explanations giving context to the actual policy. They often contained two functions: the first was to explain the purpose of an academic library, and the second was to cite values and statements from professional organizations that supported the library's own values.

The Role of an Academic Library

There was nothing surprising about the role of an academic library. Library items were necessary for teaching, research, learning, free expression, and creativity. Large research libraries have a stewardship and preservation duty; several policies emphasized the importance of not interfering in the publication record or mediating the scholarly conversation. Diversity, accessibility, and "equitable access to information" were also identified as important for an academic library in our sample.[58] Intellectual and academic freedom were frequently mentioned as well.

Supporting Statements

Policies relied heavily on statements from organizations outside of the library to support their stance. Although most policies referenced at least one guiding ideal or document, some referenced several, with the highest number being seven. The most referenced statement was the ALA "Library Bill of Rights."[59] The ALA "Intellectual Freedom Principles for Academic Libraries" and the ALA

"Freedom to Read Statement" were also cited several times.[60] Statements that were cited only once were the American Association of University Professors academic freedom statement, the ALA "First Amendment and Censorship Statement," the ALA "*S*tatement on Book Censorship," the ALA "Freedom to View Statement," the ACRL "Statement on Academic Freedom," and the ALA Policy Manual.[61] One library cited the First Amendment of the US Constitution. BYU cited their religious doctrine.[62] Several referenced institutional guiding documents such as collection development policies, mission statements, and institutional policies.

Varying Procedures

All but two policies included some explanation of a procedure for making a reconsideration request. The procedures for handling a reconsideration request varied significantly, as did their specificity. One commonality was that these reconsideration procedures involved more than one person. In almost every library, decisions were made in consultation with others—mostly within the library, but some also referred to university counsel. Requiring requests to be made in writing was another similarity. Some libraries even required a signed form before they would consider the request.

Those policies that included forms (the minority, 35 percent) had varying levels of difficulty. Some forms were short, requiring only the name of the individual challenging an item, bibliographic information of the item to reconsider, and reason for the challenge. Others had multiple open-ended questions ("Are you aware of any review or criticism of this material by scholarly/literary sources?" "To what in the work do you object? Be specific, cite page numbers and quote exact passages").[63]

Borrowed Language

This last theme is unsurprising given the culture of sharing among libraries; policies often borrowed language from each other to varying degrees. A few phrases showed up multiple times. One was a variation of "The Library occasionally receives requests from the producers or previous owners of library materials in all formats that the Library return, destroy or delete particular items that have already been acquired."[64] The other phrase was a variation of "materials acquired or produced as part of the Libraries' collections will not subsequently be withdrawn based on allegations of false, misleading, pejorative, defamatory, offensive, or potentially harmful content."[65] The last one was "The library may choose to document the perceived problem that generated the request for return or withdrawal to inform potential users in the catalog record and possibly also in or on the item itself."[66] We did not determine the originator of these phrases, although several policies referenced Cornell University's policy as inspiration.

Discussion

Our analysis reveals more than just the anatomy of the reconsideration policies in our study. The themes we identified in policy content have implications for the relationship libraries want to cultivate with their communities. In our discussion, we explore the subtext of our findings.

Soft Nos and Conflict Relationship Management

The Soft No category takes a number of forms and enables libraries to make versatile decisions based on their specific goals and contexts. Broadly, the collection of Soft Nos suggests that on one hand, ARL libraries do not want to remove books from their collections, but on the other, they also want to keep dialogue open with their communities. What works for one library, however, does not necessarily work for another. Some institutions, like Northwestern, indicated that they may want a chance to respond to their community about reconsideration requests. Others, like UIUC, anticipated that some challenges may be valid but wanted to be clear that those cases are rare. In other cases, like the University of Florida, a library would not remove an item from the collection but might have added a contextual note. Ultimately, many of these Soft Nos hedged the library's stance. Although they provided space for recognizing nuance and inviting dialogue, they were not necessarily edifying to the policy reader.

The use of reconsideration policies, and in particular those that fall into the Soft No category, may be seen as a conflict management strategy. As organizations seek to address disagreement or conflict with the public, they can take a spectrum of advocacy and accommodation positions.[67] The reconsideration process allows libraries to recognize nuances in collection strategy and find balanced approaches to addressing community needs. In the event of a challenge, the use of reconsideration policies supports organizational efforts to achieve a collaborative stance that both advocates for library values and is attentive to community needs. In contrast, libraries that do not have reconsideration policies may not be able to advocate as strongly for library values and may unduly concede to requests to reduce material access. Libraries that take a more competitive No Reconsiderations stance may appear less open to feedback and miss opportunities to address community needs through dialogue and collaborative problem-solving. Northwestern's policy was an example of a collaborative conflict management strategy. They stated they will not remove items, but they have a "process to engage in a dialogue around the immediacy of access to potentially harmful collections."[68] Although the purpose of this dialogue could be more explicit, it was clear that Northwestern was trying to connect with its community in this policy.

Cautionary Labels

As an alternative to item removal, some of the reconsideration policies offered the option to put a note in the record or item, depending on the situation. Emory's policy was more specific about when a note would be placed, saying they "may document and reference the objections raised regarding the materials, including adding any corrections, errata, warnings or notices about inaccurate information, to the catalog record or on the item itself."[69] The University of Florida, by contrast, stated that they "may choose to document the perceived problem that generated the request for return or withdrawal to inform potential users in the catalog record and possibly also in or on the item itself."[70] Libraries need to be thoughtful about what they mean with statements like this. Under what circumstance will they include a label and what will the label say?

The ALA "Labeling Systems: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights" distinguishes two types of labels: (1) "view-point neutral directional aids" and (2) "prejudicial labels."[71] Directional aids "are a convenience designed to save time" like stickers indicating genre. Prejudicial labels are content warnings: "Prejudicial labels are designed to restrict access, based on a value judgment that the content, language, or themes of the resource, or the background or views of the creator(s) of the resource, render it inappropriate or offensive for all or certain groups of users."[72] ALA provides a stern warning about prejudicial labels, calling them "a censor's tool."[73] The ALA and the Association of American Publishers' "Freedom to Read Statement" also specifically warns against adding labels: "[A label] presupposes that individuals must be directed in making up their minds about the ideas they examine."[74] Virginia Tech was the only library in our sample to make a statement against adding such labels: "[The principle of academic freedom] includes the rejection of practices that . . . involve the prejudicial labeling or rating of library materials."[75]

Antelman also discusses the implications of any content warning, focusing on the labels "potentially offensive" and "harmful."[76] For Antelman, "potentially" is a key qualifier that "makes explicit the subjectivity" of what is offensive; the reader decides what offends them.[77] By contrast, "harmful" as a label indicates the library "is claiming a negative impact on the reader."[78] They state: "The move from offense to harm shifts responsibility to the library for the negative mental state readers may experience based on their own sensibilities (they took offense) and acknowledges the offense as both real and damaging."[79] If a library acknowledges something is harmful, they should be prepared to take responsibility for that harm, which might run counter to free speech and intellectual freedom.[80]

We have ongoing questions about adding extra information into the record or item. On one hand, we can imagine a scenario where labeling is one way to be responsive to the community. For example, perhaps a library wants to indicate that a book contains something that is culturally sensitive.[81] Adding a label that indicates a book contains images of human remains, for example, can certainly be a directional aid that gives extra information to the reader without being prejudicial. On the other hand, we could imagine groups abusing this to make political statements. Where are the boundaries? How do we define community needs? How do we distinguish harm from offense?

Missing Pieces

We noticed some points were largely absent from the policies in our analysis. First, very few institutions defined who could participate in a challenge. This may reflect the orientation of the public institutions in the set of policies we identified, which are more likely to serve public audiences than their private counterparts. One institution's reconsideration form required authentication to access, so this library limited reconsideration requests to their current students, staff, and faculty, although the policy itself did not detail a specific limit for community requests. We can imagine a scenario where a library would want to hear from someone outside the campus community about something in their collections.

Second, none of the policies we examined included what a successful challenge would entail. We saw examples of what happens if a challenge is unsuccessful (e.g., it will not be eligible for reconsideration

again). It may be that removal or restriction procedures are detailed in internal documents. This could also be another indicator of libraries' unwillingness to remove books or a tacit acknowledgment that a successful challenge is unlikely.

Limitations

Although our study provides an important survey of reconsideration policies in ARL libraries, we recognize limitations to our approach. We looked at a small subset of academic libraries in the United States, and we cannot expect our results to be generalized to the academic library community more broadly. Collection management at ARL libraries is often different than at other types of academic libraries; small regional universities, liberal arts colleges, and community colleges likely have different collection priorities, smaller budgets, and limited staffing. Further research is needed to understand the landscape of preparedness for book and resource challenges at other types of academic libraries.

Despite our thorough process, it is also possible that we did not capture every policy used by ARL libraries to field reconsideration requests, which would give an incomplete picture. The rate of reconsideration policy presence in our sample—20 percent, with only 5 percent as part of a broader collection development policy—is lower than the findings of Tokarz, who identified 28.7 percent of R1 library collection policies on public websites to have a section on resource challenges and intellectual freedom.[82] Though our studies looked at different groups of institutions—ARL versus R1—there is substantial overlap between them. The discrepancy could be due to our search terms or how we defined a reconsideration policy, which may merit additional investigation between the two research samples.

Conclusion

Our results provide clarity on research library preparedness to handle material challenges. Given the low proportion of reconsideration or challenge policies identified from institutions in our research sample, it is likely that many large research libraries are unprepared to effectively respond to collection challenges. This may be due to an assumption that the purpose of large research libraries to support academic research and teaching and to maintain the scholarly record exempts them from reconsideration requests; this includes the possibly that challenges may occur but are not taken seriously by a library, a finding from Oltmann.[83]

The wide variation in policy content evident among our research sample also suggests that reconsideration policy norms in ARL libraries are still in development. Academic library collection management and purposes differ from public or school libraries, where resource challenges are a more longstanding and public issue, so it is logical that policy needs for academic libraries, and in particular large research libraries, would look different. Our findings will help inform the creation of reconsideration policies that serve institutional priorities and values at academic libraries of all sizes. As a community, we would benefit from heeding the calls from over three decades of challenge and reconsideration policy researchers in academic libraries to create or update our policies related to censorship and collection challenges.[84] Our team joins this recommendation, and we additionally

implore the academic library community to develop reconsideration policy standards for academic libraries to make effective policy development more accessible in a higher education context. After our close reading of policies through the present study, we present a few recommendations to complement those found in the ALA *Intellectual Freedom Manual* "Policy Checklist—Reconsideration of Challenged Resources."[85]

Academic Library Reconsideration Policy Recommendations:

1. Explicitly allow reconsideration requests by having a public policy. The ALA recommends this, and we want to emphasize that this is best practice for academic libraries as well.
2. Be clear and do not hedge. Keep the language simple and straightforward. Do not get bogged down in the justifications.
3. Embed this policy within your collection development policies. This gives your policy context. We noticed some of the policies that were embedded could skip much of the preamble because it was already covered in the greater collection development policy.
4. Opt for an easy form. Do not make your community jump through unnecessary hoops. Your ability to do this, however, might depend on your library's political climate. Is your university supportive of library decisions? Does your state have laws or bills pending about divisive concepts?
5. Assign someone the responsibility of reporting challenges to the ALA. This does not need to be in your public policy, but we recommend including it in internal guidelines so someone is responsible for this step. Many academic librarians may not realize they should report challenges. You can report to ALA using this form: https://www.ala.org/tools/challengesupport/report.
6. Use a strong supporting statement relevant to academic libraries. We recommend the ALA "Intellectual Freedom Principles for Academic Libraries" because it references the "Library Bill of Rights" but contextualizes it specifically for an academic audience. We also recommend the ALA "Freedom to Read Statement." In our opinion, it is the strongest anti-censorship statement and covers many of the points made in preambles.

We have also created a template reconsideration policy for academic libraries based on the above recommendations, which can be tailored to any institution. It is located in the appendix and is licensed CC BY-SA 4.0.

Appendix

[Replace the information in brackets to suit your institution]

Academic Library Collection Reconsideration Policy

Library Mission Statement: [Insert the appropriate mission statement here]

Reconsideration Guidelines:

[Your institution] Collection Development Guidelines are based on the research and instruction needs of [your institution]. The library uses the American Library Association's "Intellectual Freedom

Principles for Academic Libraries" and the "Freedom to Read Statement" (https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations/intellectual; https://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/freedomreadstatement) as guides to ensure that a wide breadth of materials is available to the [your institution] community. Request for reconsideration of materials follows the rigorous process below:

1. An individual completes the reconsideration form.
2. The request is reviewed by the [designated leader, e.g., director of collections, collections coordinator, etc.] with the appropriate [designated advisors, e.g., collection advisory group, relevant subject liaisons, collection specialists, etc.].
3. These librarians submit a recommendation and the submitted reconsideration form to the [administrator] for review.
4. The [administrator] makes the final decision, ensures necessary actions are taken, and informs the individual in writing within 90 days of initial request, barring unexpected staffing changes.

NOTES:

a. The item being reconsidered remains available to the [your institution] community during the review.
b. The [administrator]'s decision is final.
c. The [designated leader] maintains a file of all reconsidered items that includes the title, date challenged, date resolved, and disposition.
4. Please direct any questions about this policy to the [designated leader].

Reconsideration Form:

Note: Materials will not be reconsidered without a complete form.

1. Your name:
2. Your email address:
3. Your phone number:
4. Your university affiliation:
   - Faculty/staff
   - Student
   - Community Member
   - Other: _____
5. Title of Work:
6. Author/Creator:
7. Stable URL/Permalink or Call Number:
8. What are your specific objections to this work? Please include any page numbers/time stamps.
9. What do you want to happen to this work?

Reconsideration Report (Internal):

Title: _____

Author: _____

URL/Call Number: _____

Resources Consulted: (include policies, articles, reviews, etc.)

_____

Materials Reconsideration Recommendation to Administration:

_____

Justification and comments: (include majority and minority positions)

_____

Material reconsideration reviewed by: _____

Date: _____

Administration's decision: _____

Date of challenge notification sent to ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom ([designated leader]) https://www.ala.org/tools/challengesupport/report: _____

[Date of adoption]

Contributor Role Taxonomy

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