Book challenges and bureaucracy in the heartland: A qualitative analysis of librarians' perceptions of book challenges

by

Krystal Cooper

B.S., Kansas State University, 2013
M.S., Kansas State University, 2015

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Social Work
College of Arts and Sciences

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2026

Abstract

This study aimed to examine public librarians' perceptions of book challenges, how they resisted book challenges, and why. While the number of book challenges increased drastically in 2021, there is little information regarding librarians' perceptions of book challenges aside from the perspectives of large organizations. To answer these questions, 23 librarians throughout Kansas, Missouri, and Oklahoma were interviewed to better understand their perceptions of book challenges and how they respond to book challenges. Interviews were then analyzed using a coding strategy derived from grounded theory. The respondents emphasized treating all book challenges as well-intentioned, though they expressed some concern that people challenging books may not be considering the needs of everyone in the community. The librarians strongly opposed resisting book challenges. They emphasized the importance of adhering to policy and having conversations with patrons. Participants claim that their decisions regarding challenges were largely guided by a sense of professional values and a desire to maintain libraries as welcoming spaces for everyone in the community. This project concludes with discussions on librarians' responses and how those responses tie into literature on bureaucracy and professionalism.

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Acknowledgements

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge that none of the work accomplished occurred in a vacuum. First and foremost, I would like to thank my major professor, Dr. Steinmetz, who read every draft, offered guidance, and helped me with my (admittedly lacking) public speaking skills. His mentorship has been invaluable. I would also like to thank the rest of my committee, Dr. Linnemann, Dr. Medley, and Dr. Fritch. I greatly appreciate all the insight and suggestions offered to improve my work.

I am deeply grateful to all of my colleagues, who were supportive and patient as I took on this endeavor. Jan, especially, thank you for listening to early versions of my presentation when they ran much longer than they were supposed to. Denise, I appreciate all your emotional support. Sandy, thank you for your wisdom and pragmatism. I'd like to also express gratitude to my dear friend Adrienne, who offered criticism and perspective on my work and my presentation. Thank you to my partner, Gabe, who offered practical suggestions as I grappled with this undertaking and who took on additional work as I spent so much time away from home. Last but certainly not least, I'd like to thank every librarian that has ever been a part of my life. I truly believe that without librarians, the world would be a worse place.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Book challenges are a politically controversial matter involving "requests by members of the public to remove, relocate, or restrict books from or within institutions" (Knox, 2015, p. 9). There are multiple outcomes from a book challenge. One is that a book is relocated, often by taking a book intended for children and shelving it in sections intended for adults (Knox, 2015). Books may also be restricted, which typically involves moving books behind the service desk or into some location inaccessible to the public so that anyone interested in the material must ask for it (Knox, 2015). Generally, when a book is restricted, it can only be checked out with age restrictions or parental permission (Knox, 2015). The final and most drastic outcome of a book challenge is a ban—the book is no longer accessible to anyone and may be removed from the library entirely. These challenges and their outcomes are often decried as censorship or First Amendment rights violations (Knox, 2015).

The American Library Association (ALA) has documented a drastic increase in challenged books and changes in the strategies and processes through which books are challenged in recent years (ALA, 2024a). In 2019, 377 books were challenged; even at that time, there was growing concern among librarians about encountering more scrutiny than they had in the past from conservative politicians looking to censor books (Spilka, 2022). By 2022, the ALA documented the highest number of challenged books in the organization's 20 years of collecting data on book challenges (ALA, 2023a). The 1,269 challenges were almost double the number of book challenges in 2021 (ALA, 2023a). The number of books being challenged at a time also changed in 2022. Prior to 2022, book challenges only targeted one book, whereas in 2022, 90 percent of challenges included multiple titles (ALA, 2023a). The information on book challenges for 2023 indicates that the total number of book challenges was 1,247 (ALA, 2024a). Multiple

titles being challenged at one time continued to occur, with cases of 100 or more books being challenged at a time (ALA, 2023b). The number of book challenges reported to the ALA decreased in 2024 to 821, with 2,452 unique titles being targeted, but the ALA notes this is still much higher than instances prior to 2020 and indicates a concern for soft censorship, in which librarians will preemptively not offer books to prevent the possibility of book challenges (ALA, 2025). In 2025, the ALA did indicate another decrease in book challenges to 713, but 98 percent of those challenges involved multiple titles (ALA, 2026). The number of unique titles challenged was 4,235, which the ALA reports to be the second-highest number of all time; 2023 was the highest at 4,240 (ALA, 2026). The ALA further notes that 92 percent of these book challenges were initiated by pressure groups, government officials, or administration (ALA, 2026). In 2025, 66% of book challenges resulted in bans. This is the highest number of successful book bans since they began collecting data in the 1990s (ALA, 2026). Regardless of the metric used, book challenges have become a phenomenon of interest in recent years.

Despite recent surges in book challenges, criminological research on the matter is lacking. Media censorship in public libraries is criminologically important for reasons surrounding not only First Amendment rights but also how we transform public servants into public threats. There is a growing concern that librarians risk criminalization in some states (Jaeger et al., 2023).

The paucity of research on book bans in public libraries, combined with the drastic change in the number of book challenges and how many titles are challenged, indicates a need for additional research on the problem. This dissertation involves semi-structured qualitative interviews with Midwest librarians to understand how these public workers perceive and

navigate book challenges. Given that librarians are directly impacted by book censorship, this research aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are librarians' perceptions of book challenges?
2. How are librarians resisting book challenges, if they are resisting at all?
3. What are the motivations behind resisting or not resisting?

These questions are important because of the dearth of research on people's perceptions of book challenges, much less librarians' perceptions, who are directly impacted by book challenges and who often must justify the collection of materials in their library. Furthermore, librarians can face significant consequences for failing to abide by legal efforts to censor books (Jaeger et al., 2023). Additionally, despite the above reasons for the relevance of this study, some available research does indicate a possibility that some librarians are not necessarily opposed to book censorship (Busha, 1970; Carmichael & Shontz, 1996; Wiegand, 2015; Wiegand, 2020). As such, there is a need to further consider the complexities of librarians' viewpoints on the matter.

A vast majority of the respondents were from Kansas, as it represents an important location to study such challenges.[1] While one might initially assume Kansas to be a state strictly in line with right-leaning values, which are generally more likely to support book challenges in the current political moment, the situation in Kansas is more complicated than many would assume. True, it does have a relatively conservative reputation and has consistently voted Republican in all presidential elections since 1968. Yet, Kansas was also the origin point of John

[1] While there were two respondents from the neighboring states of Oklahoma and Missouri, their responses were still very similar to the responses of the Kansas respondents, indicating that the sentiments shared by the respondents could extend into other areas of the Midwest.

Brown's rebellion against slavery, one of the first states to vote on women's voting rights, inspiring other states to follow, and the site of *Brown v. Board of Education,* a Supreme Court case known for declaring segregated schools to be unconstitutional. In recent memory, Kansas has demonstrated a willingness to break party lines. For example, Kansas has elected Democratic governors in its history (including its most recent Governor, Laura Kelly, who was elected both in 2018 and in 2022). Additionally, when constitutional protections for abortion were up for a vote in the state, Kansans voted to keep these protections.

Despite this complicated political history, it is true that Kansas librarians have had to deal with many book challenges, and some have dealt with significant consequences from perceived or actual failures to comply. In June 2023, librarians Kari Wheeler and Brandy Landcaster put up a book display for autism awareness to go with the summer reading theme "All Together Now" in Sterling, Kansas (Edwards, 2023). One of those book displays featured a rainbow-colored infinity symbol with the words "we all think differently," which received backlash from the board of directors because a member assumed the rainbow was regarding LGBTQ+ rights and "[did] not want the library to promote LGBTQ agendas" (Edwards, 2023). The day after, a meeting was held in which the librarians provided information stating that libraries cannot censor materials based on viewpoints; the board fired them in a private meeting two weeks later (Edwards, 2023). In St. Marys, the library director worked with a library advisory committee to remove books from the library.[2] The city commission required her to do this to retain the lease that was threatened (Mipro, 2023). The director of the St. Marys library stated that she felt bad that the books were pulled because she believes everyone should have a variety of materials, but also felt she was in a precarious position given that the city of St. Marys owns the building the

[2] The town of St. Marys spells its name without an apostrophe.

library is in (Mipro, 2023). In southern Kansas, Andover Public Library experienced similar issues when they received backlash from a social media post during banned books week. Seeking to bring awareness to commonly challenged books that were in the Andover collection, Andover posted Captain Underpants on Monday and Genderqueer on Tuesday (Loging, 2023). The Tuesday post received attention from people outside of the Andover community who began threatening to destroy library property and forced the library to stop posting on social media (Loging, 2023). These are only some cases in which book bans have affected Kansas libraries and librarians.

State representatives have also leapt into the fray by attempting to pass legislation of their own that facilitates such challenges, such as House Bill 2700, which would establish a nine-person task force to establish a rating system for public school libraries (Mipro, 2024). Representative Adam Thomas, who requested the bill's introduction, argues it is not censorship but simply a rating system to make parents aware of the contents of various materials (Mipro, 2024). Opponents of this bill argue that it is overreach and express concern that decisions will be based on politics rather than in the interest of learning (Mipro, 2024). This died in committee but does indicate that the Kansas legislature is aware of book challenges and interested in influencing what libraries are able to offer (H.B. 2700, 2024).

Before detailing the results of the analysis of qualitative interviews in which Midwest librarians' and library workers' responses indicate librarians adhere to professionalism and bureaucracy, the literature on book censorship is reviewed (Chapter Two). This overview includes the legal arguments around obscenity laws, as the American Library Association considers the legal cases to be crucial in the pursuit of intellectual freedom. The chapter will also include historical censorship in libraries, the effects of the current censorship efforts, and

criminological literature on resistance. After reviewing the literature, Chapter Three describes the methodological approach taken in this study. In short, the study uses both purposive and snowball sampling strategies to recruit librarians and library workers into the study; data gathering involved semi-structured qualitative interviews, and data analysis utilized a grounded-theory-based approach to inductively produce themes rooted in the data. Chapter Four will discuss the results, which indicate that librarians have complicated perceptions of book challenges, but reject the notion of resistance and instead respond by adhering to their policies. Chapter Five will conclude with a discussion on the librarians' responses and how that ties into the research on bureaucracy and professionalism. This chapter also addresses limitations and prospects for future research.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

The following section will cover the literature on book challenges. First, this section reviews the history of book challenges in the United States. The focus of this review is limited to the American context because the overarching history of book banning is long and winding. A comprehensive overview of this history is beyond the scope of the current study, though relevant historical details are incorporated into the analysis when appropriate. This review will then examine the books that are targeted and the impacts of book censorship, followed by research on the perceptions of book censorship.

History of Library Censorship

Censorship in American libraries has occurred since its early foundations in 1731. Steele (2020) extensively covers the history of library censorship, noting that some of the censorship was not explicit, but still impacted people's access to information. For instance, early libraries did not contain fiction books. Wiegand (2015) notes that when Benjamin Franklin started his Library Company, there were no fiction books, rather there was a focus on information. Public libraries did notice an increase in book circulation when fiction was available and attempts to prohibit fiction books were often met with reductions in library memberships and book circulation (Wiegand, 2015). To push back, many libraries would place fiction books in closed stacks, which required patrons to go to the library desk for a book they wanted to check out; in contrast, nonfiction books were placed in open stacks, where patrons could freely look for a book without assistance (Steele, 2020; Wiegand, 2015). Other attempts to limit fiction consumption were made, such as limiting how many fiction books a patron could check out (Steele, 2020; Wiegand, 2015).

At the time fiction books were being restricted, it was primarily women reading fiction, and much of the fiction written was challenging social inequality, including slavery, working conditions, and debtors' prisons (Wiegand, 2015). The attempts at restricting fiction were, arguably, gendered and an attempt to discourage the public from thinking about social issues of the time, given that it was fiction novels discussing the struggles that many people encountered. There were limitations to what women could check out, which was framed as a way of protecting "ladies' delicate sensibilities" (Wiegand, 2015, p. 35). Wiegand (2015) cites an instance in the 1860s where a librarian went so far as to not allow a woman to check out a medical book without a note from a doctor that confirmed it was for her son, who was studying medicine.

Industrialization and urbanization also increased access to imagery and newspapers that contained sexually explicit discussions (Stone, 2018). This was met with backlash, one such example being the Comstock Act passed by Congress in 1873 (Stone, 2018). Being extremely religious, Anthony Comstock's initial work towards the Comstock Act started in New York with the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) pushing to criminalize the sale of "obscene and indecent" material such as pornography, erotica, or discussions on sexuality, including an attempt to prosecute a woman who had written an article criticizing a minister's promiscuity while he preached against it (Wood, 2010). Comstock later determined that these laws should be nationwide (Stone, 2018). The results of Comstock's work, with support of the YMCA and several wealthy businessmen, including J.P. Morgan and Samuel Colgate, would lead to the passing of the Comstock Act, formally entitled "An Act of the Suppression of Trade in, and Circulation of, Obscene Literature and Articles of Immoral Use" (Stone, 2018; Wood, 2010, p. 37). This Act prohibited the distribution of materials considered to be obscene, which included but was not limited to pornography, erotica, any information on reproductive health, and

criticizing The Bible or even having a differing interpretation of Biblical scripture (Steele, 2020; Wood, 2010). Comstock was notorious for his aggressive pursuit of anything he deemed obscene until his death in 1915 (Steele, 2020; Stone, 2018). It should be noted that his targets were more likely to be those who would be easy to prosecute (Wood, 2010).

It is also during this time that one of the oldest cases around obscenity makes it to the Supreme Court, *Rosen v. United States* (1896) (Steele, 2020). While the First Amendment is not explicitly discussed in this case, Lew Rosen challenged court indictments, arguing that he did not know which parts of a mailer he had sent through the post office were determined offensive by the grand jury (*Rosen v. United States*, 1896). In this case, the Court defined obscenity using the *Hicklin* test, derived from a notable British case *Regina v. Hicklin* (1868). This test essentially dictates that material is obscene if it would corrupt those who had access to it and who were open to it (*Rosen v. United States*, 1896). Towards the end of Comstock's life, there were challenges to the aggressive censorship of the Comstock Acts as the general public's views began to shift away from such restrictions, but obscenity was assumed not to be protected by the First Amendment (Steele, 2020; Stone, 2018). While, at the time, the discussion of obscenity and libraries seemed unconnected, the ALA today relies on various rulings around obscenity and censorship to defend its stance against censorship when discussing book challenges.

Steele (2020) also notes that librarians engaged in censorship of information in the 19th and 20th centuries by race, simply by not having books available to the public. Librarians relied on the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature*, an index of periodicals, to add to their book collections (Steele, 2020; Wiegand, 2015). The guide did not include periodicals from marginalized groups (Steele, 2020; Wiegand, 2015). Even if librarians were not deliberately

excluding voices, the lack of attention to marginalized groups did act in a way of censoring voices by not including them.

In 1938, Forrest Spaulding of the Des Moines Public Library got his board of trustees to adopt a library bill of rights to fight censorship (Wiegand, 2015). This effort was in response to news about book burning in Nazi Germany and Chinese librarians experiencing censorship in the regions occupied by Japan (Wiegand, 2015). According to Eschete (2021), Spaulding's original Library Bill of Rights contained four policies that stated libraries should purchase materials regardless of the author's race, nationality, political or religious views, should allow materials from all perspectives, should allow meeting rooms to be available for all non-profit groups who are not charging admission fees, and should accept gifted publications from all organizations. The Library Bill of Rights was embraced by the American Library Association a year later, in which the ALA attempted to discourage censorship of writings based on race, nationality, religious views, or political views, asserting all views "should be represented fairly and adequately" (Wiegand, 2015 p. 147). The ALA also established the Office of Intellectual Freedom to follow cases of censorship (Wiegand, 2015).

Wiegand (2015) points out that despite the assertive-sounding title, the Library Bill of Rights carries no penalties when not adhered to and uses "should" statements. Wiegand (2020) is critical of the Library Bill of Rights, noting that while it gives the perception that libraries are defending intellectual freedom, it also controls the narrative, ignoring the more passive stances the ALA has taken on censorship. One such example given is a sit-in by five Black teenagers at a Virginia library protesting segregated libraries, which made national news, but the ALA made no comment on the sit-in despite it occurring two months after the Library Bill of Rights was adopted by the ALA (Wiegand, 2020).

The Library Bill of Rights was tested shortly after WWII, a period in which libraries faced pressure to censor not only materials that were deemed inappropriate for their content on sexuality, but also materials that were deemed to promote communism. To increase profits after WWII, book publishers began to publish more paperback books (Steele, 2020; Wiegand, 2015). The books often had suggestive covers, which were believed to lead young people to delinquency. Librarians at the time either agreed with the belief or were intimidated by organizations pushing for censorship (Steele, 2020; Wiegand, 2015). Wiegand (2015) suggests that agreement was more likely given that the Catholic agency, National Organization for Decent Literature (NODL), was among organizations trying to censor books, and a study of five libraries that were censoring books condemned by NODL had at least one Catholic trustee at the time. This already indicates a weakness in the Library Bill of Rights because librarians still censored materials despite the adoption of said bill.

It was also after WWII that there was a rise of McCarthyism, which impacted libraries. Wiegand (2015) notes that many libraries either because they agreed with McCarthy, or because they were intimidated, simply did not buy books that were believed to spread communist beliefs. However, there were also libraries that held the belief that those books should also be available in libraries. When newspapers attacked a library in Boston, the library did push back and received support from various members of the community (Wiegand, 2015). Mediavilla (1997) notes libraries in California also pushed against McCarthyism despite accusations that they were communist sympathizers. These libraries fought censorship without the help of the ALA despite the adoption of the Library Bill of Rights (Wiegand, 2020).

In 1957, with *Roth v. United States* (1957) and *Alberts v. California* (1957), the Supreme Court attempted to define obscenity and ruled that obscenity was not protected under the First

Amendment (Coupe, 1966; Enghal, 1969; Stone, 2018). In both cases, Roth and Alberts both argued that laws punishing the mailing of obscene materials violated the First Amendment (Coupe, 1966). The Court ruled that obscenity was not protected under the First Amendment and attempted to define obscene materials as those that are "utterly without redeeming social importance" and "whether to the average person, applying contemporary community standards, the dominant theme of the material, taken as a whole, appeals to prurient interests" (Coupe, 1966 p. 122-123). In other words, materials that are found to have no significance beyond titillating the average person.

In 1964, the Court further addressed the issue of obscenity in *Jacobellis v. Ohio* by adding to the definition determined by *Roth v. United States* (1957). In this case, the Supreme Court considered the case regarding a manager of a theater who had been sanctioned for showing what the state of Ohio considered to be an "obscene film" (*Jacobellis v. Ohio*, 1964, p. 184). The Supreme Court ruled that the judgment be reversed, but the judges were divided on the reasoning for the reversal (*Jacobellis v. Ohio*, 1964). The Supreme Court clarified that "contemporary community standards" were the standards of the nation and not those of local communities and added to the definition of obscenity, stating that materials dealing with sex, but still having artistic or scientific value is not considered obscenity (*Jacobellis v. Ohio*, 1964). Essentially, the community standards stated in *Roth v. United States* (1957) are the nation's standards and not local communities. The struggle to grapple with what is obscenity is summed up in Justice Stewart's opinion:

> I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description, and perhaps I could never succeed in

> intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it, and the motion picture involved in this case is not that. (*Jacobellis v. Ohio*, 1964, p. 197)

Stewart's opinion illustrates the difficulty in clearly defining obscenity and pornography, as he states that he simply knows it when he sees it, unable to specify how the film in question is not pornographic, just knowing that it is not.

While the definition of obscenity was a struggle, the Supreme Court did decide that young people also have First Amendment rights. A landmark case stating the First Amendment rights of young people is *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District* (1969), in which students decided to wear armbands to mourn lives lost in the Vietnam War and to show support of a Christmas truce proposed in the Senate (Shackelford, 2014). When school officials discovered the plans, they attempted to ban the armbands; despite this, the students decided to wear armbands (Shackelford, 2014). The three students who ended up involved in the lawsuit were all described as good students but were suspended for wearing armbands. The students fought this in court, where the judge sided with the board, deciding that discipline in school was more important than student rights (Shackelford, 2014). When the case went up to the Supreme Court, it was noted that the district court acknowledged the ruling of *Burnside v. Bryars* (1966) from the Fifth Circuit Court, which stated that students had the right to free speech but refused to follow its ruling (Shackelford, 2014; *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, 1969). The Court further noted that the armband was not disruptive and that the school did allow students to wear other political and controversial symbols, including the Iron Cross, a symbol associated with Nazi ideology, indicating that the school was singling out students' views on the Vietnam War (*Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, 1969). The Majority opinion of the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the students with Justice

Fortas stating that “It can hardly be argued that either students or teachers shed their constitutional rights to freedom of speech or expression at the schoolhouse gate” (*Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District*, 1969 p. 506). The quote from Justice Fortas is later referenced in a Supreme Court case *Board of Education Island Trees School Union Free District v. Pico* (1982) directly related to book censorship in schools.

The election of Ronald Reagan influenced an increase in book challenges in the 1980s (Linder, 2025). It should be noted that the ALA did not collect data on banned books until 1990s (ALA, 2013a). It is argued that much of the reason for ALA creating and promoting Banned Books Week is because of the book challenges in the 1980s (Linder, 2025). Sex and bodily functions became the primary reasons for books to be challenged, notably Judy Blume’s works *Are You There God? It’s Me Margaret* for discussion of menstruation and *Deenie* for discussing female masturbation (Linder, 2025; Pickering, 2023). Linder (2025) argues that these challenges continued the practice of silencing women’s experiences with reproduction and sexuality.

It is also this decade that another legal case explicitly about book censorship and students’ First Amendment rights makes its way to the Supreme Court. In 1982, three members on the Island Trees School District Board of Education obtained a list of books deemed "anti-American, anti-Christian, anti-Sem[i]tic, and just plain filthy," from an activist group, Parents of New York United (*Board of Education Island Trees School Union Free District v. Pico*, 1982, p. 853; Munic, 1983). The Board was encouraged to follow the procedures in place to address the concerns about these books by establishing a committee of staff and parents and following the committee’s recommendations (Munic, 1983). While the board followed the procedures and appointed a committee, they disregarded the recommendations of the committee and removed all but two of the books from the library (Munic, 1983). Arguing that the board violated their First

Amendment rights, a group of students sued; the district court ruled in favor of the board; on appeal, The Supreme Court sided with the students (*Board of Education Island Trees School Union Free District v. Pico*, 1982). The Court held that the board cannot remove books from the library if they are motivated by disagreeing with the ideas in the books.

In the early 2000s, librarians still engaged in self-censorship despite community requests. Wiegand (2015) notes community members placed requests for libraries to carry content about the LGBTQ community, and librarians frequently opted not to for fear of challenges from the community. Wiegand (2015) also notes that libraries as late as 2010 would sponsor events addressing race and ethnicity but still avoided topics of sexual orientation. While libraries can challenge societal biases, Wiegand (2015) asserts that many uphold these biases and frequently refuse to acknowledge their own complicity.

While this project will be focusing on book censorship, it is worth noting that the internet did complicate the discussion around the First Amendment for libraries. The Communications Decency Act was passed in 1996 as a first attempt to regulate obscenity online (Steele, 2020). Parts of the CDA were struck down in *Reno v. ACLU* (1997) because parts of the CDA were vague in the definition of offensive. In this ruling, the Supreme Court also established that the First Amendment also covered how one expressed themselves. In 1998, the Child Online Protection Act was passed. The Supreme Court also found COPA to likely be violating the First Amendment in *Ashcroft v. ACLU* (2004). The Court did suggest the use of internet filters, suggesting filters to be an effective and less restrictive way to ensure minors were protected online. In 2000, the Children's Internet Protection Act passed, requiring schools and libraries to have internet filters to receive federal funding for internet access (Steele, 2020). The American Library Association challenged this law, expressing concern that internet filters were not

narrowly tailored enough to ensure information would not be limited (*United States v. ALA*, 2003). The Supreme Court ruled that CIPA was not unconstitutional.

Topics Targeted in Contemporary Book Challenges

Many proponents of book bans claim such censorship is necessary to protect children. However, the ALA notes that most of the books challenged in 2021-2024 were either about characters or by authors who were people of color or people who were part of the LGBTQIA+ community (ALA, 2022; ALA, 2023a; ALA, 2023b; ALA, 2024). For instance, *And Tango Makes Three*, a children's book based on a true story about two male penguins who raised a chick at the Central Park Zoo, made the top ten most challenged books for 9 years; 4 of those years it was the #1 challenged book (ALA, 2011; ALA, 2013a). Similarly, as of 2024, *All Boys Aren't Blue* and *Gender Queer* are the two most challenged books (ALA, 2025). Linder (2025) also notes that the voices of women are disproportionately challenged. To support her assertion, she explores specific examples of books that have made it to the ALA's Top 10 Challenged Books, such as books in which young women and girls experienced sexual assault, intimate partner violence, and violence that occurs in spaces that are supposed to be safe.

Burmester and Howard (2022) assert that the increase in censoring books in classrooms is motivated by the misguided belief that the books being pulled are teaching critical race theory—a perspective that illustrates how racial inequality continues in the United States. Burmester and Howard (2022) suggest engaging students in critical thinking about literature, authors, and the context they were writing in to still encourage critical thinking under strict censorship, but this does indicate an effect of book banning is that teachers are put in a position where they self-censor and alter how they might teach to ensure effective lessons for critical thinking. The targeted challenges indicate that censorship is impacting more marginalized groups. Pickering

(2023) asserts that censoring books has a harmful effect on marginalized youths because their stories are silenced and erased, further isolating their understanding of the world. Lowery (2023) adds to this, asserting that in silencing marginalized populations' understanding of the world, those who could identify with those stories might not be able to understand how their experiences of the world and their history may be different from the dominant group. Similarly, McClure (2022) argues that attempting to censor books hinders young people's critical inquiry by limiting different points of view. Additionally, in limiting different points of view, McClure (2022) argues that these book challenges limit recognition that people can address social problems by being involved in social actions. McClure (2022) uses examples such as children's books about *Mendez v. Westminster School District,* explaining the legal fight to end school segregation; by censoring it, students can become less aware that people can impact institutions and can change society.

There is also an argument that overall, the censorship of books might have no effect or even increase the likelihood that books of concern are read. There is research that indicates that book challenges increase the circulation of the targeted book by 12 percent (Ananthakrishnan et al., 2023). Other research, following bookshop sales, local library checkouts, and Google searches for three months after a book is challenged, indicates there is no effect on the circulation of challenged books, nor an increase in sales; there is only an increase in Google searches (Goncalves et al., 2023).

There is financial incentive for politicians to focus on book challenges. In Republican leaning states, the Republican Party candidates receive more donations in instances where books are challenged (Ananthakrishnan et al., 2023). Goncalves et al. (2023), in examining data of book bans tracked by PEN America at county level, argue that book challenges are an attempt to

motivate a shrinking voting bloc by appealing to the "culture war." They note that the strongest predictor of when book censorship is likely to occur in a school district is when a right-leaning school president still holds more than 50 percent of voters but is facing a more competitive race than they had in prior elections. In counties that voted conservative without electoral challenges, there was less likely to be an attempt to censor books (Goncalves et al., 2023). In sum, they find that book censorship had very little impact on the interest in a book, but it was a form of political signaling to conservative voters (Goncalves et al., 2023).

Perceptions on Book Censorship

In 2015, ALA's Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom cited a Harris poll that indicated an increase in people favoring book censorship (Garner, 2015). Garner (2015) notes a political division, with Republicans being more likely to support censorship. People with no college or some college were also more likely to support book censorship (Garner, 2015).

Current research on the perception of book censorship indicates that most people are opposed to book censorship. Hartsfield and Kimmel (2020) explored perceptions of censored books in a summer book club for adults that discussed challenged children's books. Opinions about the challenged books were varied, but three themes came up in the book club discussions, the first being that good books allow for discussion, the second being that readers want to hear a message that sticks with them, and finally that ultimately adults have a role in what children read (Hartsfield & Kimmel, 2020). Hartsfield and Kimmel (2020) note that the attendees could see why some of the books would be offensive to some groups of people but still did not think they should be removed from libraries. Hartsfield and Kimmel's (2020) findings indicate that none of the parents who participated in the book club would entirely ban the books, but the authors assert

that challenges to books should be viewed as an opportunity to open dialogue and that people who select books for youth should clarify why they have selected those books.

McGehee and Chrastka (2025) note in their research of over 3,200 parents that most consider libraries to be a safe place and value the role of librarians in helping children. There were indications of a political divide regarding the availability of books that contained content that has been challenged recently, but most people opposed censorship (McGehee & Chrastka, 2025). McGehee and Chrastka (2025) find that people who identified themselves as Republican on their surveys were in favor of more restrictions on books than those who identified themselves as Democrat. Respondents who felt that librarians should be prosecuted for books they made available were also more likely to identify themselves as Republican.

Knox (2015) finds, through interviews with people who have pushed to censor books and analyzing transcripts of book challenge cases, that people who push for book censorship tend to use exaggerated and militaristic language, comparing the availability of books they have deemed offensive to attacks on people. Krutka (2024) also notes that people in favor of book censorship use language indicating a sense of urgency in public forums.

In analyzing the transcripts of the challenges, Knox (2015) notes that people challenging books also tend to blame books for a perceived moral decline of society and have a view that the past is decent compared to modern moral standards. Knox (2015) also notes that challenges are sometimes a reaction to demographic changes in a community. Similarly, by applying concepts of critical race theory, Krutka (2024) argues that counter-stories, or narratives that push back against the dominant views of the world, act as a push against the assumptions of whiteness, or the expectation of whiteness being a position of power, and the possibility of losing that power is met with fear.

Spilka (2022) argues that students' perceptions of book challenges are often overpowered by the voices of parents, but various instances do indicate that students do not support them, such as *Board of Education Island Trees School Union Free District v. Pico* (1982). Spilka notes more recent cases in which parents attempted to have books removed from school libraries, and students have reacted by starting petitions and pushing for bans to be overturned (Spilka, 2022). The literature explicitly examining the perceptions high schoolers have of book challenges is severely lacking. Hennen (2023) notes in interviews with 12 high school-age students that most of the respondents disagreed with parents who were concerned with the content in books, feeling that they were at an age to understand the content.

The lack of research on librarians' perceptions of book censorship is a topic this project aims to address. There is research that indicates librarians engage in self-censorship to prevent possible controversies. Carlson (2020) notes that librarians have become increasingly conscious of possible controversies and have been attempting to prevent scrutiny. While the ALA is vocally opposed to book censorship, it is noted in texts about censorship in libraries that some librarians self-censored, with some agreeing with the policies on censorship (Wiegand, 2015). There is some research indicating that graduate library school students who had more authoritarian attitudes were more likely to support book censorship (Busha, 1970). Furthermore, research from the late 1900s indicates that librarians were reluctant to carry books about LGBT issues, suggesting that librarians were not neutral parties, nor were they united in the value of providing unbiased information (Carmicheal & Shontz, 1996). While there is concern about book censorship, it is entirely possible that not all librarians are opposed to censorship.

Resistance Literature

Book challenges are a criminological concern. Brisman (2024) states that, along with the fact that there is a growing concern of criminalizing librarians who offer books deemed by the state to be inappropriate to minors, censoring books that disproportionately reflect stories of underrepresented groups and books that offer unpleasant historical facts does silence voices of marginalized people. As such, removing books from shelves is a "theft of knowledge" (Brisman, 2024, p. 28). Brisman (2024) states that in banning books, especially given that students notice which books are being banned, the message of who is allowed to belong is being sent. Furthermore, he asserts that banning books intertwines an abuse of power with an abdication of responsibility (Brisman, 2024). This could be understood to mean that people in power would much rather use that power to censor books rather than accept that there are perceptions of history and society that do not align with the views of those in power. Arford (2013) also acknowledges in her research on prison librarians that there are aspects of power that are connected to book challenges. It should be noted that prisons are total institutions and are different from publicly accessible institutions because, in total institutions, all activities are tightly controlled and performed in the same location with large groups of other people under the supervision of one authority (Goffman, 1961). That said, one can see parallels in how power impacts book challenges. Justifications used to censor books include the concern that some books are a threat to the institution and that some books might hinder rehabilitation (Arford, 2013). Arford (2013) notes that the vague reasoning of rehabilitation is connected to power, because it is an attempt to change an inmate's personality. One can also see the parallel between threats to an institution within the prison being a concern to those who challenge books in the public sphere, given that, as Brisman (2024) states, the books being challenged most often are

those that challenge the dominant group's narratives. This could be considered a threat to the security of the dominant group.

Given that the guiding questions in this project are exploring how librarians resist book challenges, resistance literature needs to be considered. Hayward and Schuilenburg (2014) assert that resistance is underdeveloped and loosely defined. They attempt to conceptualize resistance by positing that it does not necessarily have to be a negative force, but can also be a creative force for politics, art, love, and science (Hayward & Schuilenburg, 2014). They also suggest that resistance is a three-stage process of invention, imitation, and transformation (Hayward & Schuilenburg, 2014). Jeff Ferrell (2022) seems to argue that resistance can be in everyday acts of defiance. He indicates strengths in leaderless resistance, which he argues invites all sorts of people and can spread much like a seed (Ferrell, 2022). Ferrell (2022) expresses doubt on the notion that resistance has to be intentional, suggesting that there are instances in which minor revolts can occur out of pure exhaustion of dealing with the system and that resistance does not necessarily require taking on the whole system, rather even minor acts like pushing against an unfair boss and turning the rules around to illustrate the flaws in the rules can be resistance.

Kelly and Winlow (2022) offer criticisms of this assertion, suggesting that minor offences should not be classified as resistance, and that such suggestions take away from the work that comes from organized resistance. They seem to argue that instead of celebrating small, individualized forms of resistance, there is a need for focusing on intentional resistance that works towards an alternative to the current system (Kelly & Winlow, 2022). Bedford (2022) also offers criticisms, suggesting that resistance without understanding how capitalism is an underlying structure of oppression can reinforce that status quo. Bedford (2022) asserts that the little moments Ferrell sees as resistance are unlikely to lead to a revolution and can push us left

or right. Looking to eco-socialist resistance, Bedford (2022) suggests that mass organization is necessary for a better world, citing examples of how people resisting can use the system to push back, such as online petitions lobbying shareholders to divest from companies that are environmentally harmful, or Indigenous communities challenging developmental projects in courts. She does recognize a need for a counterculture in the current system, which could exist in some of the actions Ferrell discusses (Bedford, 2022). She further asserts that Ferrell is correct in saying that getting discussions around resistance wrong can hinder resistance and bolster the systems that are being fought.

Naegler (2022) appears to criticize the polarization of the perspectives on resistance. One side heavily focuses on everyday acts of defiance, which has been argued to be naïve. The other side suggests that resistance needs to be organized, which she argues takes an all-or-nothing approach in their arguments (Naegler, 2022). Naegler (2022) suggests that the ultra-realist perspective has some merit in saying that resistance needs to create alternatives to the status quo, and that resistance needs to be long term. However, Naegler also suggests that this does not mean that daily acts are not important. It can create networks and offer a glimpse at an alternative. Drawing from the Occupy Wall Street Movement, Naegler (2022) notes the ultra-realists' criticisms that the movement failed because it did not have a charismatic leader and was only imitating and never achieved the transformation stage. She argues that perspective lacks historical context in part because imitation was deliberate, and the movement aided in coalition building (Naegler, 2022). She further asserts that academics can look to how inequality is reproduced in academia and resist in those areas because the revolution will not be won in academic journals.

In examining resistance among prison librarians, Arford (2013) notes prison librarians do resist formal and informal censorship that occurs in the prison system. Within prisons, prison administration has a lot of say in what goes into a prison library to begin with, and the prison policy can be inconsistent, with some books that were acceptable in the library suddenly becoming unacceptable, but librarians also encounter informal censorship from officers who remove books at their own discretion (Arford, 2013). That said, some librarians did still try to resist censorship both through formal and informal means, like formally challenging books being censored, or reporting when staff take books without permission (Arford, 2013). Informal resistance included acts such as finding loopholes in policies or buying more of a book that officers disapproved of (Arford, 2013).

Chapter 3 - Methods

This project explored librarians and library workers' perspectives on book challenges. As discussed, librarians' perceptions of book challenges are missing from the literature. This section will discuss how this project explored the following questions: (1) *What are librarians' perceptions of book challenges?* (2) *How are librarians resisting book challenges if they are resisting at all?* (3) *What are the motivations behind resisting or not resisting?* This chapter reviews the sampling strategy employed by this study (snowball and purposive), followed by the data-gathering approach (semi-structured interviews). Finally, the grounded theory-based approach for data analysis is reviewed.

Sample

This study relied on purposive snowball sampling strategies to recruit participants into the study. Purposive sampling is a non-random sampling strategy involving the targeting of potential respondents by the researcher who possess certain attributes relevant for the study at hand (Berg & Lune, 2012; Patton, 2015). This study targeted public librarians because of their relevant experience in dealing with controversial books and their bans, as well as their knowledge of the underlying political and ethical issues involved. Furthermore, the choice to focus on public librarians was made because they are expected to meet the needs of the public rather than specific institutions they work for. Purposive sampling strategies may also involve researchers drawing from their prior knowledge and experience in curating their sample (Berg & Lune, 2012). The author currently works for a library system that includes over 50 libraries in Kansas. By providing services for these libraries, familiarity was already established with the librarians of this region. It was assumed that this familiarity would allow respondents to feel more comfortable speaking candidly about their perceptions of book challenges. The initial

outreach started through email to all of the libraries in the North Central Kansas area with follow-up emails sent after 48 hours for those who failed to respond to the initial inquiry. Follow-up emails were sent twice to non-respondents. There were 11 respondents from the initial outreach who participated in interviews. Two politely declined.

Once participants were recruited into the study through purposive sampling strategies, the researcher asked participants if they were willing to facilitate contact with other potential participants who might have useful information for the study. This approach is referred to as snowball sampling (Berg & Lune, 2012). Lindlof (1995, p. 127) notes the strength of snowball sampling is that, in asking for referrals from interview participants, the research can "build a sample that represents an active social network." This is also efficient in finding people whose experiences are related to the research question. Lindlof (1995) notes a risk of bias and suggests asking interview participants to provide a list of potential participants and, depending on the problem, select either frequently or less frequently suggested nominees. Snowball sampling is particularly useful in studies on controversial topics, as this strategy may be able to pull in participants who may not overtly make their experience, knowledge, or beliefs widely known outside of their networks. This project started with public librarians and library workers in the North Central Kansas region. At the conclusion of those interviews, participants were asked if they would like to provide information about other library workers to interview to create a snowball sample. Thirty-four individuals were recommended by others for participation in the study. Four had already participated in an interview and were thus not considered for recruitment during this stage. Seven recommended participants were rejected from consideration at this stage because, based on the description of the recruit provided by the respondent who recommended them, they were determined to be ineligible for the study as they did not work in public libraries

at the time. The remaining pool was contacted with the same outreach procedures as the initial sample. Nine never responded to email inquiries. One librarian originally agreed to participate but subsequently stopped replying to inquiries. Another withdrew from the study before the interview could be conducted for personal reasons. This resulted in a total of 12 participants recruited through snowball sampling.

Between purposive and snowball sampling strategies, the final sample included 23 respondents from Kansas, Oklahoma, and Missouri. Table 3.1 shows the descriptive statistics of the respondents. Overall, a little over 91 percent of the respondents were white, 87 percent were women, and a little under 70 percent had a master's degree. 65 percent were affiliated with the Democratic Party, and 34 percent were Independent. The average age is 49.5. The average years of library experience is over 19 years. The ALA and Gallup (2025) state that about 70-80 percent of librarians were white, and 69 percent of librarians were female. Furthermore, the median age for librarians is 51 for men and 52 for women (ALA & Gallup, 2025). This sample is a bit whiter, and women are overrepresented in this sample compared to the national demographics; this is possibly related to some of the limitations of snowball sampling.

Table 3.1 Descriptive statistics

Variable	n (percent)
Age	Range: 32-74, $\bar{X}$ =49.5 years old
Race	
White	21 (91.3%)
Asian	1 (4.35%)
Indigenous	1 (4.35%)
Gender	
Man	2 (8.7%)
Woman	20 (87.0%)
Nonbinary	1 (4.35%)
Education	
Some College	3 (13.0%)
Bachelors	4 (17.4%)

Masters	16 (69.6%)
Political Affiliation	
Democrat	15 (65.2%)
Independent	8 (34.8%)
Time in Libraries	Range: 3-50, $\bar{X}$ = 19.6 years

Data Gathering

This study relied on semi-structured interviews to gain librarians' perspectives and knowledge of book banning. Qualitative interviews are useful for "describing social and political processes" (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 3) and are useful for understanding how events are interpreted by relevant actors (Weiss, 1995). Given that this project explored social and political processes by looking at librarians' perceptions of book censorship, qualitative interviews were a suitable approach for this project.

Berg and Lune (2012) define semi-structured interviews as an interview in which questions on the topic are prepared in advance, but interviewers can probe beyond initial answers. Additionally, the order of the questions can change during the interview, and the interview schedule itself can shift over the course of research based on preliminary findings derived from prior interviews (in other words, the interview schedule may be a living document that evolves with the research if necessary) (Bailey, 2007; Berg & Lune, 2012). Bailey (2007) states that an interviewer can follow the flow of an interview and can change when a question is asked if the responses head in the direction of a question or can skip a question if a respondent answers the question before it is asked. This was ideal for this study because it allows the respondents to answer the same questions for the study and add additional information that might otherwise be overlooked (Berg & Lune, 2012; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Given that it was not guaranteed that all librarians would have the same viewpoints on book censorship, the flexibility

of semi-structured interviews allows the researcher to focus on questions and issues with which the participant is more experienced or comfortable.

The questions asked were broken into five sections. The first section was general questions about their work. The second section was their experiences with book challenges and book bans, in which they were asked about their experiences with book challenges and how they responded to them. The third section addressed knowledge and opinions on book challenges and people who challenge books. To prevent the possibility of sounding accusatory toward participants, questions were framed to elicit perceptions based on the information they have consumed about book challenges. The fourth section of questions focused on possible resistance to book challenges. Given the respondents' emphasis on following policy, a question about policy was incorporated into this section. The fifth and final section was general demographic questions. A detailed interview schedule is shown in Appendix A.

In sum, this project involved 20.5 hours of interviews, with interviews ranging from 34 minutes to 1 hour and 24 minutes in duration. Interviews were conducted in person, or through VoIP. Despite the interviewer openly offering to travel to meet in person, 17 of the respondents opted for VoIP interview. Interviews were recorded except for one who did not consent to being recorded (notes were gathered to record interview responses in this case). Participants elected to interview in their work offices or in other private spaces at their place of employment. Only three respondents did not participate in the interview in their own personal office. They still chose to do their interview in a private space in the library they worked at. The location of the interviews, mostly taking place on the worksite, could possibly impact results, as one tends to behave differently in one's workplace.

Ethics and Data Protection

This research was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board prior to data being collected (Appendix B). Bailey (2007, p. 15) lists three major ethical concerns researchers face with human subjects: "informed consent, deception and confidentiality." Regarding informed consent, potential participants were provided with a copy of the informed consent document at the point of recruitment. The document provided a lay overview of the research, the potential risks involved, the strategies the researcher is taking to mitigate these risks, and the rights of the participant. These issues were also briefly reviewed prior to beginning any interviews. All participants were given informed consent forms. Forms were signed by participants before interview administration. Forms are stored in a locked location in the interviewer's personal office. All participants involved in this research were over the age of 18 and were not drawn from protected populations.

Potential risks of participation involve the exposure of sensitive identifying information, embarrassment, discomfort, and potential employment consequences. To reduce or mitigate these risks, the researcher took precautions to protect the identities of participants. The interviews were conducted in a location where the participant was comfortable, and which confidentiality could be assured. With participant consent, interviews were recorded. The produced files were encrypted and stored on a computer. These files were stored in this manner until the files were transcribed with all identifying information removed.

Initial transcriptions utilized the aTrain software, a large language model (LLM) based program designed for transcribing sensitive interviews with multiple speakers (Haberl et al., 2024). Importantly, this software does not require audio files to be uploaded to a separate server for processing, and thus confidentiality can be preserved. Once interviews were transcribed, the

researcher checked transcripts for errors and removed identifying information, replaced identifying information with pseudonyms, slightly modified details, or redacted information altogether. After the interviews were transcribed, the audio recordings were erased.

Analysis

The current study employed a grounded theory-based approach to analyzing the qualitative interview data. Grounded theory involves the development of explanations from data rather than utilizing data as a verification of theories (Cho & Lee, 2014). Grounded theory is not a theory in itself; it is an approach to theorizing about data (Potter, 1998). Grounded theory was developed to counter a focus on grand theories and testing those theories through large quantitative data (Potter, 1998). Rather than start with a hypothesis, grounded theory was intended to ground middle-range theories in qualitative data (Potter, 1998). Corbin and Strauss (1990) state that grounded theory's goal is to "uncover relevant conditions but also determine how the actors under investigation actively respond to those conditions and the consequences of their actions" (p. 419). This project investigates how librarians perceive book censorship, indicating that grounded theory was an ideal form of analysis, as the project aims to understand the environment of book censorship, how librarians are responding to book censorship and the impacts those responses have.

The analytic approach taken in this study involved three types of coding: open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Atlas.ti was utilized for the analysis of interviews in this project. To ensure IRB compliance, the desktop version of this software was used. Data was analyzed as soon as it started being collected to ensure that nothing important was overlooked in further interviews (Cho & Lee, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 1990). To begin analyzing the data, interviews were transcribed, and open coding was used. Events, actions, and

interactions were compared for similarities and differences (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Corbin and Strauss (1990) state that the researcher should also look for concepts that carry over from previous observations and ones that "might emerge in site" (p. 420). For this analysis, the Atlas.ti (version 8) software was used to organize transcripts, notes, analytic memos, and codes. All coding was conducted by the researcher.

Open coding involves conceptually labeling relevant aspects of the data to begin the initial stages of forming categories and subcategories (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). While open coding, the guidelines put forth by Strauss, which include asking "data-specific and consistent questions," analyzing the data rigorously, interrupting coding with theoretical notes, and not assuming "analytic relevance" to any traditional variable unless the data indicates the relevance, were followed (Berg & Lune, 2012, pp. 365-66). This research started with an initial line-by-line coding, in which each line of data was coded with a focus on the areas that were geared at answering the questions of this project.

In axial coding, relationships among categories were explored (Cho & Lee, 2014). This allowed for theory to be more "conceptually dense" and worked to prevent gaps in the theory (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 423). Conceptually dense theories are "theoretically dense, richly dimensional, and tightly linked with one another" (Cho & Lee, 2014 p. 14). To facilitate axial coding, the researcher examined the codes created during open coding and looked for patterns before organizing codes into categories or subcodes for further development in Atlas.ti. For instance, when I looked at librarians discussing motivations behind accepting book challenges, in the initial open coding, the patterns that emerged were "inappropriate not to" "unprofessional not to" "keep personal emotions out," I found the pattern to be that they were essentially making the connection of accepting book challenges to be part of their job.

Finally, the research utilized selective coding in which a category was selected that unified the other categories (Cho & Lee, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Categories were formed when concepts of the same phenomenon were grouped together (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). This category could come from the categories already coded or need a new term to connect the findings (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). The core category is the "central phenomenon of the study" (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 424). During this stage, codes were further analyzed and collapsed into a set of core categories of codes. From there, the Atlas.ti network tool was used to see the codes interaction with each other. So here I found myself exploring how the concepts that emerged in my data relate to each other.

Chapter 4 - Results

This research started with three general questions: (1) What are librarians' perceptions of book challenges? (2) How are librarians resisting book challenges if they are resisting at all? (3) What are the motivations behind resisting or not resisting? To answer these questions, 23 librarians were interviewed. One requested not to be recorded, so one interview, while detailed, is not transcribed verbatim. Names and locations of the respondents have been changed to the names of characters in commonly challenged books over the past five years. The names of the characters are in no way intended to be reflections of who the respondents are.

The librarians largely denounced resisting book challenges but did mention the importance of adhering to policy. They also engaged in conversations with patrons who were challenging books and attended training courses to better prepare for the possibility of book challenges. The primary motivations for these actions were de-escalation, making everyone welcome, and remaining professional.

1. *What are librarians' perceptions on book challenges?*

Participants expressed complicated perceptions of book challenges. Some librarians opted for a default position that they could not assume the motivation of a challenger and thus needed to act accordingly:

> I mean—if it—cause we—you don't—you don't know what's behind the book challenge. You know, you could have somebody that's, um, upset with a book because, um, of how it portrays an illness because they're dealing with that illness and they find it triggering. Um, it, you know, it, it doesn't—we can't assume that we know why somebody is challenging it, so I think that's why we, uh, strongly say, put it in your policy, set up a

> script for yourself so you know what to say. Follow your own procedures and shut up. (Jada)

As a result, many participants claimed to err toward offering the benefit of the doubt to challengers and, indeed, electing to view them as people who just want to be heard. For instance, despite an awareness of organized efforts to advance book challenges, Nesta expresses that, in her experience, many book challenges come from a position of experiencing unwanted surprise by a book and wanting to make sure another person does not have a similar experience:

> I mean—before this national outcry, um, it was honestly people who had had a bad experience who wanted to save someone else from having the same experience. It honestly came from a really good part of humanity of like "Holy crap! I didn't know this thing was going to happen! So didn't want this thing to happen. Want to make sure other people are prepared." Um, I answered tons of questions about 'I can't put a warning label on it because then I'm already putting judgment." You know, like those conversations and things like that are still the most conversations I have. (Nesta)

Drawing off her own experiences, Nesta asserts that many of her conversations with patrons about book challenges are primarily coming from patrons wanting others to be prepared for a potentially negative part of the book. Similarly, Madison recalls an experience in which a fairy tale book in her adult section was challenged because the themes in it were too dark.

Lara explains that she chooses to view book challenges as parents simply trying to protect their children:

> For me personally, I work really hard trying to see it from a concerned parent perspective. This is a parent who is worried about protecting their child from this

> perceived danger. That is mostly what the majority of book challenges are about. And often the parent will be escalating emotionally, and you have to de-escalate (Lara).

There is a heavy emphasis from the librarians on concerned parents. This has been the approach in the past because most book challenges occur in school or in public libraries in which children's and teens' books tend to be the focus (Oltmann, 2023). Even as Nesta and Madison list examples of books in the adult section being challenged, in other examples, they both indicate a possibility that a parent challenging a book might have just had a conversation with their child that the parent was not ready to have as a result of a book.

Though librarians often espoused perspectives rooted in grace toward challengers, many also expressed concern that organized activism could be influencing or even driving such challenges. Jada, for instance, described an instance involving a challenger tied with a rightwing political organization:

> So she [one of the librarians] was speaking with one of our legislators and he was asking about certain books and…[the librarian] recognized them from Moms for Liberty. And so she let me know… Um, so I think our awareness as professionals about the opposition, uh, is important and, uh, kind of buyer beware, librarian beware, so that we, we can know. (Jada)

The organized efforts of book challenges does cause librarians to question the motivation in a book challenge and two respondents even questioned the motivation of people getting library cards. Jada acknowledges that in being aware of the opposition, her library has made changes to their policies to ensure that challenges come from a community member and a library card holder. She also acknowledges cynicism when a book challenge is experienced. That cynicism does emerge in other librarians and impacted policies. For instance, Madison notes that she

changed wording on the form for book challenges to reflect that there is not a guarantee that the person challenging a book is not doing so in good faith.

Another concern expressed, when discussing people who challenge books, is that they are excluding others in the community:

> Um, I think that they really do care for their children and like love their children. And that does come across, but I also think that it comes across as, um, pretty exclusive, like the way that they are representing their opinions. It's not for the broader public. It is for people like them specifically. And it is this idea that like, you know, "I'm protecting my mindset and my way of life and, you know, my beliefs," and there really is very little, I mean, thought maybe, or like consideration for this broader public stage. (Alaska)

In talking about her opinion on people who challenge books Alaska, points out that she thinks they care about their kids, but in their attempts to protect them, they are not considering the rest of the community. Similarly, Ama expresses that people who attempt to ban books are not thinking of the rest of the community:

> I don't like the divisiveness of people thinking the library is trying to corrupt their children or something like that. Um, and not understanding that just because they don't want their kid to see it doesn't mean I don't want my kid to have access to it. (Ama)

Ama expresses a similar frustration that people who are challenging books are not considering the needs of the greater community, but also expresses frustration because she feels they are trying to control what all kids read. She goes further to state that if she were to try to control what their kids read, they would not appreciate it.

There is also a small amount of concern with media coverage on book challenges among the librarians interviewed. Only four librarians felt the media coverage on book challenges was

good. It should be noted that those librarians also mentioned receiving their information on book challenges from sources that were specifically related to books and literature such as the ALA and Bookriot—an editorial site specifically dedicated to the topic of books, readers, and publishing. Nine of the librarians who also got information on book challenges from those sources felt the information was good, but also said they might be biased in their assessment of those news sources. Six felt that there was not enough coverage, and five librarians expressed concern over a lack of nuance in the media coverage; the concern was that regardless of which slant the article was coming from, it oversimplified the conversation to one side being good and one side being bad.

How Do Librarians Handle Book Challenges and Why?

Librarians have a reputation for sticking up for access to information and resisting censorship. This is certainly the impression one would get from examining documentation published by the American Library Association and related organizations. As such, it stands to reason that librarians would resist book challenges. Yet, when asked if they resist, an overwhelming majority of participants denounced outright resistance. Relatedly, while professional library associations such as the American Library Association bring up the First Amendment and freedom of information when discussing book challenges, there were unexpectedly few librarians that discussed it when talking about book challenges. Only eight of the 23 librarians mentioned the First Amendment, intellectual freedom, or freedom of expression as part of the importance of having a book for everyone. There did not appear to be a pattern as to who was more likely to bring up these topics.

Some participants indicated that resisting challenges would be unprofessional or even unethical. For instance, Bill explained that he does not think that a librarian who undermines a book challenge is acting appropriately:

> Resisting—you let your policy resist. Uh, again, it's just that trick of keeping your emotions out of it. You are not—I'm not here running the Bill Anderson Public Library…It shouldn't be that, um, you know, I am really—I'm trying to think of something that's not going to be offensive—I'm having a hard time. But I love the color—I love denim, and so I'm going to make sure that there is a way to support the denim cause in the selections of the materials. I'm going to really look for denim—denim-positive programming to get in front of the children and the adults. I'm going to find ways to subtly make sure that I've got denim scattered throughout my library and its, and its, you know, and its design and in its look. Uh, I'm not geared that way, so I'm not, I'm not interested in that… And you're going to lose your credibility that way because then you're not a professional anymore. You are a denim wacko that's trying to get denim everywhere, and I am a polyester person, and I'm not going to put up with it. (Bill)

For Bill, pursuing an agenda to undermine book challenges would not only be unprofessional, but would compromise his credibility as a librarian. He uses the analogy of denim to illustrate that allowing biases to get in the way of his role as a librarian would undermine his professionalism and ultimately reflect poorly on him.

Indeed, there is the possibility that even discussing subverting policy to undermine challenges could backfire against the librarian, as Trinity explained:

> …there was a training that I didn't attend but I heard about where a librarian was talking about ways to go around the system to keep um people like the Moms for Liberty groups

> from having meetings in the library and—and part of what this person was saying was well just go ahead and book—book the rooms yourselves so that the people can't use them, you know thinking of sneaky ways to—to manage challenges or to manage groups that may be anti-library and what I want to say about that is that does us more harm than good um I—we—you know you've heard the saying 'when they go low we go high' library should always go high. (Trinity)

Trinity is referencing an ALA training in which Deborah Caldwell-Stone, now the former director for The Office of Intellectual Freedom, received negative media coverage for discussing ways to control room reservations. The suggestion that the librarian made sparked media backlash and requests for an investigation by the legal organization, First Liberty Institute (2026), a legal institution that claims to support religious freedom for all.[3]

In fact, fifteen of the librarians interviewed consider adhering to the policy and accepting the book challenge as part of their job as a librarian:

> Um, it isn't my place to judge whether they're [the person challenging a book] right or wrong, and their opinion is better or worse. I'm just here to provide the information and give an open door to anybody who needs it. I—I'm not advocating for transgender people. I'm not opposing them either. I'm just reflecting that this is a reality of the world, and we have information about it. Um, I can have my personal beliefs, but that's not what I'm going to have here at my job. (Manon)

[3] It feels of some pertinence to note that First Liberty Institute was also listed by the Heritage Foundation as a coalition partner (Heritage Foundation, 2023). This could indicate a preference as to which kinds of religious freedom the institute advocates for.

Manon talks about her experience with a book that was challenged for LGBTQ+ themes. She states that her role as a librarian is not to advocate for transgender people, but it is her job to reflect their existence in her collection. Much like in Bill's statement of keeping personal and professional thoughts separate, she states a separation of personal beliefs and what she does at her work. Elide expresses the similar sentiment of keeping personal opinions out of a book challenge:

> I think, you know, just again, patience and empathy and not taking it personal. This isn't an attack on you. This is someone's opinion. Everybody has opinions. Um, you know, I think, I think it is our duty to, to take it as a valid, as a valid complaint, um, and invest--, not investigate, but explore it in, in the ways that our institution has, has decided we're going to do it. (Elide)

Elide, while having only experienced informal challenges again, reflects on the importance of separating personal from professional, stating that everyone will have opinions and it is the librarian's job to take the complaint seriously and to explore the challenge.

Similarly, 12 participants argued that resistance would be unethical because it runs counter to the notion that libraries are inclusive spaces. As Marla explained, "you're bringing people in, and they're being recognized. Their opinions—they feel that their opinions matter then rather than just saying, 'No, you can't do that." She states that accepting book challenges allows people to feel like their opinions are valued rather than ignoring a book challenge. Similarly, Morrigan states:

> Um, for me personally, I think it's super important that you remember that when you say libraries are for everyone, you mean everyone, including people who challenge books. And so I think keeping the—the whole process positive, um, is also really important

> and—and making sure that, you know, we're not going to take most books out of the collection. The most that usually happens is that we may move something that ended up in children's to young adult or tween, you know, um, but they need to feel like they have been heard and like we are not judging them. (Morrigan)

Even if the librarian does not do what the patron wanted, Morrigan feels it is important for them to feel that they are not being judged for their perspectives on a book that they do not approve of. In fact, while only the 12 link the library-inclusion relationship to book challenges, all the librarians interviewed consider libraries to be a place where anyone can come in, acknowledging it to be one of the few remaining third spaces.

In contrast, there is also an acknowledgment that by having a space that includes everyone, the library is also bound to have things that offend people (n=19). This is reflected in the matter-of-fact statement Claudine gives to explain her thoughts when she hears comments expressing disapproval, even though she has not experienced a book challenge: “if you don’t wanna read it, don’t read it. There’s gonna be something to offend everyone—we’re a public library.” Claudine shares the notion that the library is for everyone, in fact, earlier in the interview, she does express the view that libraries provide a space for anyone, a sentiment shared by many of the other librarians, but that also comes with the flip side that a space for everyone means the library will have something to offend everyone.

Though many participants may have balked at the idea of outright obstruction or resistance to book challenges, many did consider there to be legitimate avenues for dissuading would-be challengers or otherwise mitigating frivolous or unnecessary claims. In these situations, participants emphasized (1) the importance of adhering to policy and (2) having conversations with patrons challenging books. These themes are discussed in turn.

Policy

While sticking to policy can help ensure librarians remain impartial and credible, other librarians view their policy as a useful backstop that may deter would-be challengers or provide some friction to help dissuade more frivolous claimants. In other words, some participants viewed policies and procedures as mechanisms that can make book challenges more involved to ensure (1) that only members of the community are challenging books (2) and that they are doing so in a meaningful way. For example, Nesta explains how their book challenge introduces friction for any potential challenger:

> So it's [referring to the book challenge form] a pdf. Like it's a file that's at everyone's desk, and so you kind of have to go in to get it. You can print it off the website, but we made sure that it was not a fillable pdf. You have to like snail mail it to me if you're going to not turn it into a library. And so that was just so that you know somebody in the state of Washington couldn't just sit down and fill out a whole bunch or anything. So we have like that's really the only barrier we've had is that it's a pdf that is non-fillable and you have to print it out and you have to write on it um and so like I—I would also if anybody ever like called and was like "I can't come into the library" we would mail you out one with a stamped self-addressed envelope to come back. (Nesta)

Nesta indicates that she does make it so that people either must come in to pick up a form or would have to wait for it to be mailed to fill out by hand. This limitation is in place because it better ensures that the person filing the book complaint is a member of the community rather than someone in another state attempting to challenge books when they are not a part of the community she serves. In fact, she claims to strongly support one's right to challenge books,

going so far as to say that government actions to limit book challenges, such as attempts in Illinois, are unconstitutional.

Madison also acknowledges that there are parts of her policies that make challenging a book more difficult in a way that makes someone challenging a book engage with the material they are challenging:

> Um, parts of my policy include things like, how did you find out about this book? What do you think the purpose or meaning of this book was? What would you suggest we add to our collection instead that addresses this topic? Um, yep. So really making them engage in a, this is probably not a word, toilsome process. Because it's toilsome for us to select these books. It's not, "oh yeah, sure, we'll take one of everything." Like, we have to be very responsible stewards of tax funds. We don't just order things willy nilly. We have a process. So, give them a taste of it. You think you want to be a librarian? Think again. (Madison)

Madison points out that the books selected in the library are selected with consideration for what the community is interested in to begin with. Some purchases are even made at the request of library patrons. So, when someone fills out a form to challenge a book, she wants to ensure that they have thoroughly thought out the book challenge and that they are not simply filling out a form based on secondhand information.

Of the four librarians who had not encountered a book challenge, three still placed an emphasis on the importance of following policy if a book challenge occurs. When asked explicitly how she would respond if she experienced a book challenge, Rachel acknowledged she would likely be unsettled, but she would fall back on policy:

> [I'd] probably freak out a little bit, I mean, my—my first thing would be to do is just to—to pull the book from the shelf to read it myself. Um, not to, not to quarantine it…Um, but I think that that's where I would start in our—in our policy, I believe I have a month to read the challenge, determine my findings by the end of the month or like within a month span. And so, but that's the first thing that I would do. If I haven't read the book, I would, um, for sure. I would take a look at the challenge and make sure that it's filled out correctly because if that person hasn't, you know, one of the questions is, have you read the full book? And if it's a no, I mean, my determination is going to be faster. I feel, I still feel as if I would read the book because I want to be then prepared if they come back and say, "well, now I have read the whole book and this is what—," you know, great. That's fine. Let's have this conversation. Um, but I would say that read the challenge, read the book, then go from there. (Rachel).

Rachel's comment about adhering to policy also includes a theme mentioned earlier of making the book challenge involved. In following the policy, she also included that the patron needs to have actually read the book that they are challenging. A patron having not read the book that they are challenging would impact the outcome of the challenge The implication of them having to come back after reading the book indicates that the challenge would not end in their favor if they had not read the book. There was only one librarian interviewed in this study who did not place an importance on policy. She had never encountered a book challenge and was unsure what the policy was regarding book challenges.

Conversations

All but one of the librarians discussed having a conversation with patrons to remind them that even if that patron does not like a book in the library, the library does provide other books

that they might enjoy. Mary Elizabeth, while being the only librarian who did not reference her policy if she experienced a book challenge, does provide an example of the conversation she might have if she did encounter one:

> I hadn't really thought about it. Um, I suppose, let's say somebody challenged my display, where I put all the banned books out on the display. Um, I would probably tell them, if they said, "those books are banned, um, you shouldn't have them out." I'd probably say, well, I have 50 other shelves in here, so I would direct them to a different shelf. I, I don't know. I haven't encountered that. (Mary Elizabeth)

Mary Elizabeth, much like the other librarians, reminds people who are challenging books that libraries are going to have a multitude of books and not all will be the right books for them, but they do have books for everyone. Similarly, Charlie suggests directing patrons to books more suited to their preferences:

> Um, if you would consider, uh, resistance as a sort of trying to have a conversation with somebody first versus just immediately giving them a form for reconsideration. I guess for, from one perspective, that could be considered a—a kind of pushback or resistance. Um, but I don't necessarily see it as resistance. I see it as good customer service where you're trying to engage with this person and saying like, "hey, I'm sorry, this was not the right book for you or your family. Uh, let's try to find something that is. Um, and let me explain to you, uh, why this book might be right for another family." (Charlie)

Charlie acknowledges that this could be perceived as a form of resistance, but he sees the conversation to be more about customer service, trying to remind a patron that even if they were not satisfied with their book, there are plenty of other options to choose from. Only one librarian

said they did not have a conversation and simply gave patrons a reconsideration form when they came in with a complaint.

Having a conversation with patrons and listening to their concerns is expressed as important for book challenges, enough so that this shows up in trainings for staff at larger libraries. These trainings are intended to help employees who work with the public, but are not necessarily librarians—such as part-time staff—feel more prepared if they encounter a book challenge, and also allow the staff to give patrons the contact information of supervisors, as illustrated by Aelin:

> We have a process, we follow it. It doesn't come up very often, but I do train the staff on everything. What I don't want them to ever do is panic…just ask them those questions verbally just let them talk and like don't immediately even offer them the form just like let them say their thing and then if they want the form give them the form also give them the entire library material selection policy like print it off and--it's a pdf--and hand that to them with the form and you know give them my card (Aelin)

Aelin once again encourages staff to have a conversation with patrons challenging a book before simply handing them the request for reconsideration form. She does mention a concern of heightened emotions and panic. Many of the librarians either did trainings for staff, attended trainings themselves, or did both. This was considered important for preparing for book challenges, so they knew how to respond. All the librarians acknowledged a possibility of emotions in book challenges, as indicated by Aelin when mentioning the concern that her employees might panic. Training employees tends to be a way to mitigate the concern for heightened emotions.

The themes that emerged when librarians discussed their motivations for their responses to book challenges were de-escalation, professionalism, and all patrons being valued. When librarians mentioned having conversations with patrons who were upset by a book in the library, an overwhelming majority perceived the conversation to be important to de-escalating a situation. The importance of a librarian being professional and encouraging all patrons to feel valued emerges when discussing how book challenges are handled by following policy.

When discussing motivations for their responses to book challenges, all but one of the librarians who had conversations with patrons challenging a book said listening and expressing empathy was important to de-escalating most book challenges. Elain explains her perspective on having a conversation with patrons:

> …that can kind of de-escalate, I would say 98% of concerns. It's just listening, letting them share their concerns and then, you know, giving them the full picture of like, "I gotcha. We, there's also materials that I feel uncomfortable with on the shelves. Um, that's part of the deal kind of thing." (Elain)

In these conversations, she points out that expressing empathy for the person challenging the book helps to de-escalate the book challenge and also acknowledges that libraries are going to have books that are not for everyone. The librarians that were involved in book challenges mention emotions from the patron being a concern and using the conversation as a way to let a patron be heard.

Chapter 5 - Discussion

This study aimed to examine public librarians' perceptions of book challenges, how they resisted book challenges, and why. This research aimed to address a gap in the literature by examining public librarians' perceptions of book challenges. In this study, librarians offered the benefit of the doubt to book challengers, acknowledging they do not know the motivation behind them. Librarians largely rejected the idea that they "resisted" book challenges outright and, instead, emphasized the importance of adhering to policy as a method of neutralizing or mitigating potentially frivolous challenges. Many also claimed to engage in conversations with patrons as an alternative means to handle potential challengers as well as attended trainings about challenges. Participants claim that their decisions on challenges were largely guided by a sense of professional obligation and a desire to maintain libraries as welcoming spaces regardless of political ideology. In other words, these participants responded like bureaucrats. This sensibility is consistent with prior literature which has framed libraries as bureaucratic institutions, for better or worse (Jones, 2020; Jordan-Makely, 2019; Lynch, 1979; Nataraj et al., 2020; Olorunsola, 2000). As such, this chapter situates the findings within the literature on libraries as bureaucracies, professionalism, and how the responding librarians relied on professionalism when encountering book challenges.

Bureaucracy

Bureaucracy is a term of "ambiguous meaning" often used as a pejorative to describe organizations thought to be overly rigid and impersonal (Peabody & Rourke, 1965, p. 803). The term, however, has a more precise sociological meaning. In his classic study on the matter, Weber (1978/1921) describes bureaucracy as a form of organization that developed in the modern state as civilization became more complex. Weber (1978/1921) asserts that the advance

of bureaucratic organization is because of its speed, steadiness, and precision, which meet the demands of a capitalist market economy. Bureaucracy is characterized as jurisdictionally constrained, firmly ordered hierarchically, and governed through written documents and a strict separation of work and personal life. Officials were expected to be trained, working to their full capacity, and to abide by rules which are exhaustive, stable, and learnable. Peabody and Rourke (1965) similarly describe bureaucracy as:

> a certain kind of formal organization, characterized by a complex administrative hierarchy, specialization of skills, and tasks, prescribed limits on discretion set forth in a system of rules, impersonal behavior with regard to clientele, and separation of ownership and control in the sense that the members of the bureaucracy no longer own the tools and instruments with which they work. (p. 803)

It is, in other words, a modality of social organization intended to create stable, rigid, and predictable outcomes among members and by the organization itself.

When defined as such, the organization of libraries reflects tenets of bureaucratic institutions. Lynch (1979), for instance, notes that library work involves hierarchical divisions of labor where tasks are divided between worker ranks and specialties, with positions supposedly being based on skills and competencies. Authority and operations are rooted in written policies and procedures which are, at least intended to be, exhaustive and stable. The library worker, when confronted with conflicts between the personal and the professional, can easily rely on the written policies to guide their decision-making. Such policies are written, usually by the director, approved by the board, accessible to patrons, and enforced equally across patrons by the librarians. For example, one respondent reported that when their book challenge was issued by someone associated with a board member, after adhering to the library's policy on book

challenges, the book still stayed on the shelf. That respondent illustrated this bureaucratic rationalization by asserting that not deviating from protocols ensured that she was able to carry out work, helped mitigate environmental problems, and provides consistency in cases of staff turnover as described by Lynch (1979).

Further, when workers are at work, they are generally expected to be performing their duties. Similar observations were detailed by Jordan-Makely (2018), who also identified libraries as bureaucratic organizations. Rather than disparaging this organizational strategy, Jordan-Makely (2018) argues bureaucracies are simply part of the structures of everyday life and can offer significant benefits like efficiency through classification systems and predictability. Both Jordan-Makely (2018) and Lynch (1979) contend that the structure of libraries is intended to ensure efficiency and stability while insulating the organization from outside influence.

Jordan-Makely (2018, p. 302) is right to acknowledge that bureaucratic organization is "the water in which we swim." There are good reasons to criticize bureaucracy. It can be an iron cage as Weber (1978/1921) suggests, but, as Jordan-Makely (2018) offers, the strengths and opportunities of bureaucracy can also be harnessed to benefit the library and the public. She offers examples of using the Dewey Decimal system as a way of offering predictability, but this can also apply to book challenges, because by adhering to bureaucracy, one can ensure that changes cannot be made at the impulses of outside forces. It is against this backdrop that we can examine participant appeals to library policy and professionalism in their responses to book challenges. Bureaucracy provides them with a sense of professional obligation, the procedures to follow, and cover if their decisions are contested. It is toward the professionalism of librarians in this study that the analysis now turns.

Professionalism And Policy

Treating all things equally is a characteristic of bureaucracy as mentioned by Weber (1978/1921). Weber (1978/1921, p. 975) states that a fully developed bureaucracy also operates under the principle of "*sine ira et studio,*" indicating that business should operate without emotions. This principle may explain why librarians in this study claimed to respond to all book challenges in accordance with their policy regardless of their own personal opinions on the book, treating all instances of book challenges equally. In exploring the perceptions of book censorship, many of the librarians admitted they did not know the motivations behind a book challenge and expressed concern for the organized efforts, but they adhered to treating all book challenges the same. In fact, even in instances where they thought a challenge was reasonable, they still adhered to their policy. Many librarians in this study acknowledge that they have their own biases when discussing perceptions on book challenges. Yet even still, they fall back to having a strong policy and sticking to it.

The librarians in this study described themselves as needing to adhere to professional standards or to sustain professionalism. The definition of professionalism is fundamentally tied to the concept of a professional. Evetts (2013) asserts that the definition of a professional is still disputed, noting the difficulty in distinguishing a profession from an occupation. In grappling with the difficulties of this, Evetts (2006; 2013) states that researchers have accepted the lack of a hard definition, but most researchers have settled on professions being regarded as a "knowledge-based category of service occupations that usually follow a period of tertiary education and vocational training and experience" (Evetts, 2006, p. 135). In terms of bureaucracy, professionals can be understood as office holders, a person accepting "fealty to the purpose of the office" rather than to a personal or political allegiance (Weber, 1978/1921, p.

959). According to Evetts (2013), the concept and definition of professional*ism* is rooted in trust—the kind that is necessary for economic and administrative relationships to occur in complex social organizations. People must trust the professional and, in turn, the professional must earn that trust by acting accordingly (Evetts, 2013). Evetts (2013, p. 784) claims that professionalism brought about stability, put community needs over the individual, and helped "form a bulwark against threats to stable democratic processes." The concept of professionalism is also argued to act as a form of control to ensure professionals maintain moral obligations and values and acts as "internal self-regulation" (Evetts, 2013, p. 785).

The theme of professionalism and bureaucratic rationality is apparent among the participating librarians because the perception of keeping trust in their role is reflected in their decisions not to resist book challenges. The respondents' statements about ruining credibility, asserting the ideal that libraries should "go high" when others "go low," and ensuring that if someone were to investigate the results of a book challenge, they would find that policy was followed "to a T" all reflect a desire to establish that they are worthy of the trust given to them by the public. Furthermore, respondents reflected a level of professionalism in their perceptions of book challenges. They acknowledge they do not know the motivations behind a book challenge and default to treating the situation as coming from a concerned parent. As noted by Oltmann (2026), prior to the influx of book challenges from organized groups, the traditional book challenge came from a parent concerned about a book their child had checked out. While there are acknowledgments from the respondents that they do not know for sure the motivations behind a challenge, they go through a process of addressing book challenges that has worked in the past.

Additionally, when one considers their suggestions that people who are challenging books are not considering the greater community, one can see how they are maintaining professionalism by promoting the needs of the community over an individual's needs via strict adherence to policy. One person could not remove books from the library on a whim, despite some trying to remove entire topics (LGBTQ+ topics being a common one, but one respondent mentioned a group wanting to remove all the diet books because the challengers thought the books encouraged body-shaming). Essentially, by adhering to the policies and maintaining professionalism, librarians were able to ensure that drastic changes were not made to said collection based on the perceptions of a few people.

In strictly adhering to the policy, the librarians in this study illustrated professionalism. They were showing that libraries were worthy of trust from the public: if someone revisited a book challenge, even if the librarian or the challenger did not personally like the outcome, the challenger could be assured the dispute would be handled fairly. The librarians were putting the community over the individual by ensuring books would not be randomly removed from the shelves based on demands of an individual. This is even if the librarian felt that the challenge was a reasonable challenge. Additionally, as noted by Oltman (2026), the heavy outside influence of book challenges, such as Moms for Liberty, has increased; by strictly adhering to their policy when faced with a book challenge, it slows down the potential for someone trying to file a book challenge frivolously and can mitigate the influence of people from outside the community trying to challenge books.

In sum, the librarians in this study responded as bureaucrats sticking firmly to policy when encountering a book challenge. Under the impression that doing so is the professional thing to do, the librarians in this study claimed that adhering to professionalism is the best way to

ensure that all book challenges are treated fairly, and to maintain trust with the public. In the context of librarians encountering an increased amount of scrutiny by sections of the public, the act of behaving as a professional allows librarians to help to ensure that people see their actions as behaving in a way that is not biased for or against certain positions

Conversations

Weber (1978/1921) acknowledges the importance of *written documents* in bureaucracy. They provide both direction, legitimacy, and justification for action or inaction. The adherence to the written document is apparent in the responses of the librarians. Yet, it is important to acknowledge that there can be tension between how a policy is written and how people execute the policy in practice. In particular, there are many bureaucratic organizations in which actions are not wholly granularly dictated and, instead, rely on officials to interpret the rules and act accordingly. In addition, librarians are in a class of bureaucrats that regularly work with the public. They are, in effect, what Lipsky (1983) refers to as street-level bureaucrats, direct public-facing officials who have discretion in their work like a teacher or police officer, and therefore are far more likely to interact with the public than are higher-ranking officials like a congressperson.

Lipsky (1983) notes that street-level bureaucrats are constrained by rules, regulations, and policy, but have some relative discretion because they are also professionals in their field. Essentially, a street-level bureaucrat can use discretion, but decisions made are still within the confines of such regulations and rules (Lipsky, 1983). That said, even with discretion, one can expect the street-level bureaucrats to conform to expectations, more often than not. Discretion becomes an important topic for this study because the respondents rarely indicated much exercise in discretion; however, the act of trying to have a conversation with patrons could be

seen as an act of discretion. In starting the conversation with a concerned patron, this act does help the patron reframe a book of concern to a book that is simply not right for that patron, but it also acts to prevent a formal book challenge from taking place. It essentially cuts the problem off at the pass and bypasses the bureaucratic process. Conversation is customer service, as Charlie explains, but it also allows for the policy to not have to be put into action to begin with. Essentially, it does de-escalate an irate patron, but it also de-escalates the potential for a formal book challenge.

The finding that librarians may engage folks in conversation to diffuse tension driving a book challenge is not surprising when considering works from information sciences, which provide verbal strategies for conversing with possible challengers. For instance, Pekoll and Oltmann (2023) suggest laying a strong foundation for the library's stance on free speech by emphasizing the library's stance on intellectual freedom and emphasizing that the library is there to serve everyone long before experiencing challenges. This is reflected in the librarians interviewed in this study, who emphasized that libraries will contain materials for everyone even at the risk of potentially offending people. There is a heavy emphasis on having conversations with patrons who have concerns about books, such as understanding their concern and "shifting the conversation away from the resource…to why they came into the library in the first place" (Pekoll & Oltmann, 2023 p. 132). This is reflected in the conversations the respondents mention having with concerned patrons to de-escalate challenges, in which many shift the conversation from the book of concern to what else is available in the library.

Practical Implications for Librarians

In considering how this research can be useful to librarians, the research illustrates the importance of having a policy for book challenges. An overwhelming majority of respondents

discussed the importance of having a strong policy to address book challenges. In practical implications, this work could remind librarians of the importance of their policies. While only one respondent did not express the importance of policy, it may be important for librarians to revisit their own policies to consider the strengths and weaknesses in them. For instance, some librarians could consider some of the policies that other librarians have as possible models to help strengthen their own policies.

Limitations

This study is not without limitations. The first concern the reader could express is the argument that people change their behavior when they are being studied, commonly referred to as the Hawthorne Effect. The Hawthorne effect is named so after a 1924 study at the Western Electric Company Hawthorne plant that came to this conclusion (Kompier, 2006; Schwartz, 2013; Simons et al., 2018; Wickstrom & Bendix, 2000). Research indicates the possibility of different behavior when people are being observed (Schwartz, 2013; Simons et al., 2018). It is pertinent to consider that a librarian's behavior might be different when there is already an increased level of scrutiny of librarians, especially on the topic of book challenges, which is one of the focal points of said scrutiny. PEN America (2026) recently published a study indicating that libraries are under intense political pressure. Individuals are being appointed to numerous library boards for ideological purposes. Some governing bodies are even weaponizing funding to demand compliance. Additionally, some states are attempting to prevent libraries from accepting grants from professional organizations, like the ALA, under the premise that the ALA is "woke" (PEN America, 2026). Librarians also face harassment through verbal and physical assault, doxxing, treats and being recorded (PEN America, 2026).

Under these circumstances, it is possible that participants were withholding or cautious with their responses. The fact that all interviews took place on a worksite could have also altered behavior and responses. People do tend to alter behaviors at work in general, this could also include responses to interview questions regarding a contentious topic. Perhaps to mitigate this in the future, anonymous surveys could be distributed to help respondents feel more anonymous with their responses.

The lack of Republican and conservative-leaning librarians in this study is also a limitation. Republican librarians do exist. In fact, the 2025-2026 American Library Association President, Sam Helmeck, claims to be Republican. That said, more conservative voices are noticeably absent from this study. This could be attributed to biases emerging from snowball sampling as more liberal leaning librarians may have tended to recommend other liberal leaning librarians for the study over more conservative librarians. Attempts were made to recruit such individuals known through personal conversations to be conservative, but they generally refused to reply to solicitations to participate. One talked about her policy but said she did not have time for a full interview. It is possible that the phrasing of the outreach email came off as biased (even if unintentionally). Additionally, there was a tendency to refrain from pushing the matter because of the complicated interpersonal dynamics that were involved. That said, future research should endeavor to secure participation from more conservative-leaning librarians.

A final limitation of this research is that this only sampled librarians in the Midwest. It is entirely possible that perceptions and attitudes of librarians might be different in other regions of the country. A possible option for future research could be to expand this research to other areas in the United States to see if there are similarities or differences based on region.

Future Research

The results of this study indicated that policy is a significant factor in how librarians manage book challenges. As such, future research should include a policy analysis of library book challenges policies. Policy analysis is a "multidisciplinary inquiry aiming at the creation, critical assessment, and communication of policy-relevant information" (Dunn, 2012, p. 2). According to Knoepfel and colleagues (2007), there are three general approaches toward policy analysis. The first examines policy as an indication of the underlying character of the state. Within this approach, there are three perspectives (Knoepfel et al., 2007). One which understands the state to respond to social demands; one which sees the state as servicing specific groups or specific social classes; and one focuses on interactions between actors such as interest groups such as state officials and their relationships to the private sector (Knoepfel et al., 2007). The second approach does not exclude the role of the state, but rather than focusing on theories of the state, this approach aims to consider how public authorities work (Knoepfel et al., 2007). This approach attempts to consider the complexity of policy by considering decision-making processes and actors involved in the process, for instance, policy reforms for decentralizing power (Knoepfel et al., 2007). The third approach focuses on outcomes by considering the effects of policy. Each approach would be useful for examining library policies on book challenges. For instance, from the perspective of viewing policy as a reflection of the state, one could consider looking at how much libraries have changed their book challenge policies over time and if these changes reflect broader shifts in larger political institutions. One could also examine the effectiveness of book challenge policies. Do tactics to ensure book challenges are legitimate prove effective? These are possible questions that one could explore for future research.

Perhaps another aspect to explore is centered around their de-escalation practices. This is mentioned explicitly in their conversations around book challenges; this is not the only time that a library worker must engage in de-escalation practices. There are additional trainings within the field to prevent and mitigate conflict in libraries, especially when considering that some populations that use libraries have more specialized needs (Dowd, 2018). Furthermore, several of the librarians in this study acknowledged that while they are not social workers, there are times that they have had to take on aspects of that role to better help patrons. There could be a need to explore de-escalation training for librarians in comparison with other occupations that require de-escalation, such as law enforcement or social work, given that these occupations are arguably also ones in which one has to interact with the public when there might be heightened emotions.

Conclusion

In considering the resistance literature, it is entirely possible that even though the respondents are bureaucratic and professional when faced with book challenges, they are still doing some acts of resistance. One could consider Ferrell's (2022) discussion about turning the rules around. While the responding librarians were not explicitly resisting, they still found ways to push back against the influx of challenges by utilizing policy and de-escalating concerns about books through conversations with patrons. Ferrell's (2022) argument seems to suggest that adhering to the rules can reveal the inefficiencies and how controlling they can be, but in the case of the librarians, the "mass *obedience* of the rules" still "produce similar resistant effects," but in a way that can be protective of institutions that are being targeted (p. 615). The strict adherence to policy can be recognized as a quiet act of resistance. The librarians may say they do not resist book challenges, but their actions do indicate that there is some pushback to book challenges, even if it is minor pushback.

It should be noted that public librarians do have a say in how policies are written. It is entirely possible that, along with viewing their adherence to policy as the professional thing to do, they are not necessarily going to be conflicting with others about the way policies are written. In contrast to Arford's (2013) research on prison librarians, public librarians have a more say in how policies are written. Rather than serving in a total institution such as a prison, they are serving the public and have policies approved by a board, which typically consists of people appointed by governing officials who have been voted on by the public, such as the mayor and the city council, instead of a prison warden. These policies can act as resistance in a way that hinders people who might excessively challenge books. For instance, the respondents do mention having certain requirements for a book challenge, such as the patron actually reading the book or requiring that the patron suggest a book that equally fulfills the need of the book they are challenging, which are ways to make the process of challenging a book more difficult.

Additionally, having conversations with patrons is still a form of resisting a book challenge. The act of having a conversation, while acting to de-escalate emotions, also helps mitigate the possibility of a formal book challenge. The responses to book challenges are occurring at a time when libraries are facing increased scrutiny, librarians are perpetually accused of indoctrination, inappropriate behaviors, and abuse of children and libraries continue to face the threat of being defunded (Jones, 2024, PEN America, 2026). Adhering to bureaucratic levers is a way of maintaining legitimacy and a way of showing that they are being fair in how they treat book challenges.

Ferrell (2022) rejects the idea that resistance must be intentional to count as resistance, noting his own experiences with graffiti artists who proclaimed a lack of political intention, but were still engaging in acts of resistance through various challenges to power in their artwork and

how they accomplished their art. He simply states that "a lack of expressed intentionality—does not necessarily disqualify an act from being resistant" (p. 608). This could be applied in this project because, again, while the librarian rejected the notion of resisting book challenges, there is an acknowledgment that strong policies and conversations are important to de-escalating book challenges. The attempt to de-escalate book challenges in itself could be an act of resistance, especially when librarians have experienced a growing concern with the book challenges coming from people who are not necessarily even members of the library or are challenging books they have not read. While they may not be openly trying to resist book challenges, the de-escalations could be there to ensure the challenges are being made in good faith. Furthermore, the intention may not be actively resisting, but as stated in the literature on libraries as bureaucracy, the librarians could be trying to ensure their library is stable in the sense that the collection of books does not change based on the whims of a few people.

Furthermore, while bureaucracy is not without criticism, there are strengths to it. It can be problematic by acting as a way to perpetuate existing power structures; it can also be associated with frustrations due to paperwork and delays (Nataraj et al., 2020; Olorunsola, 2000). But on the other hand, there are arguments that, at national levels, bureaucracy can act as a bulwark in instances of democratic backsliding (Bertelli, & Falletti, 2025, James, 2025; Yesilkagit et al., 2024). Admittedly, the arguments do focus on large-scale bureaucracies, such as government, courts, and electoral officials, but the possibility of bureaucracy slowing extreme movements can be applied in the instance of librarians too. It has been established that the increase in book challenges is connected to larger organizations pushing for books to be pulled off library shelves and disproportionately targeting books on marginalized communities (Charbonneau et al., 2023; Oltmann, 2023). Even with a majority of the respondents not explicitly focusing on the ALA's

concerns of freedom of information and speech, they still strongly believe in adhering to policy to determine if a book is to be taken off the shelf. This bureaucracy still acts as a shield against extreme steps to remove knowledge from the public. James (2025) discusses how the "bureaucratic 'zealot'" can act as a firewall to democratic backslides, using an example of electoral officials adhering to their standards when faced with threats of violence. One could consider how this might apply to a smaller scale. Librarians' strict adherence to policy may minimize the harm that outside organizations can do to get books taken out of libraries.

To tie both Ferrell's argument of intention and James's suggestion of bureaucratic zealots upholding democracy together, even if the respondents' intentions are not to act as a bastion of free speech as one might expect given the stance of professional library organizations, the perceptions still reflect a concern that book challenges may be occurring with ill intent. The librarians acting as bureaucrats can still act in a way that slows the process of removing books from the public, which can still act as a buffer in a time when book challenges are still at an all-time high.

On one hand, participants' reliance on policy to handle book challenges can be understood as self-protection intended to insulate them from political fallouts or personal attacks. This is a kind of situation that bureaucracy is created to address. In fact, some respondents stated that the policy is to be a protection for everyone, including any patrons challenging books, because it prevents the removal of books that they want on the shelves too.

Despite the strict adherence to policy, the concept of bureaucratic routinization does not appear to apply to the respondents. The concept of bureaucratic routinization, first discussed by Merton, suggests that there is a concern of people focusing on the rules to a point in which the "[a]dherence to the rules, originally conceived as a means, becomes transformed into an end-in-

itself…" (p. 563). Essentially, the worker gets caught up in following rules to a point that it hinders the goals. Lipsky (1983) builds on this, acknowledging that street-level bureaucrats are going to be more likely to engage in routinization in situations where they are overworked and do not have enough resources. While some of the librarians do mention a concern about financial resources, the use of policy does appear to be intentional. When discussing their policies, they offer reasoning for their policies and why they adhere to them; they also acknowledge a willingness to have them changed if the policies prove to be problematic. Furthermore, when one considers an overwhelming majority of the respondents' beliefs that libraries should be for everyone, and that is part of their motivation behind their responses to book challenges, one could argue that the intentions of their policies line up with their beliefs about what a library's role should be, not simply for the sake of complying with policy.

On the other hand, there is literature on bureaucracy being used to deliberately create friction in processes. For instance, Gouldner (1954, p. 175) discusses "bureaucratic sabotage" in which workers conform to the rule while deliberately violating the intention of the rule. This is not the impression that was received from the respondents; in fact, two of the respondents indicate that they are using their policies in good faith. One mentioned that she had her policy changed when, after a book challenge, she had discovered that the process took too long to conclude. She wanted her policy to be smoother for people challenging books. Nesta, who admits that her reconsideration form does make people write, also mentioned that she does not try to preemptively make policies based on what she reads regarding organized groups challenging books. Similarly, working-to-the-rule, or obeying rules with the intent of disrupting operations, would not apply here (Napier, 1972). The respondents acknowledge strict adherence to policy, but when discussing their motivations, they are rooted in professionalism, such as

wanting to keep public trust and not ruining credibility. Furthermore, as noted earlier, when the process did seem to cause disruptions, the policies were changed. Ultimately, their conformity with policy seems to be an attempt to secure the core values and objectives of the library itself. Bureaucracy does not seem to be an end in and of itself for participants nor leveraged as a kind of weapon of resistance.

Bureaucracy is not without criticism, but it is the water in which we swim. As such, the strengths of bureaucracy can be utilized to protect institutions in instances where outside forces attempt to make drastic changes because the policies and adherence to professionalism can slow down, if not completely stop, the changes that are attempted.

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Appendix A - Interview Schedule

Basic Questions

1. **How long have you worked in libraries?**
2. **How did you get involved in this line of work?**
3. **For you, what is the value of the library?**
    a. What do you think is the role of the librarian in the community?
        i. If libraries disappeared tomorrow, what do you think would be the impact on your community? On society as a whole?
    b. Do you feel like your work is valued? By the public? By community leaders? By local, state, or government officials?
        i. Why or why not?

Experiences with book challenges and book bans

4. **Have you ever experienced a book challenge?**
    a. What book or books were challenged?
    b. Why was(ere) the book(s) challenged?
    c. How did you respond?
    d. Please walk me through it
5. **Have you experienced people trying to remove books from shelves without officially challenging them? Such as checking them out and not returning them if a challenge didn't conclude they wanted it to?**
    a. Tell me about that? How did you respond to that?
        i. How did you come to the decision that the way you responded was the best way?
    b. Please walk me through it
6. **Have you ever decided not to get a book for fear that it might cause controversy?**
    a. How did you come to the decision that this was the best way to respond to possible controversy?

Knowledge and opinions/perception on topic of book challenges and people who challenge books

7. **Are there any trainings, lectures or discussions you've attended on the topic of book challenges?**
    a. (If yes) What were your main takeaways from them?
    b. Were there any parts that you found particularly informative?
        i. What parts? Why
    c. Were there any that you feel need to be criticized?
        i. What parts and why?
8. **Have you followed much of the news coverage of book challenges?** If so,
    a. What is your overall impression of the coverage? Is it fair? Why or why not?
    b. What news sources do you typically see covering these issues?

c. Tell me more about those sources?
d. What are your thoughts on what's being said by the sources you've seen?

9. **Have you seen much discussion of book challenges on social media?** If so,
    a. What is your overall impression of the discussion? Is it fair? Why or why not?
    b. On what social media platforms do you see discussions of book challenges?
10. **Are there any other ways you've heard about book challenges?**
11. **Overall, how do you think people who challenge books are being portrayed in the information you've seen on book challenges?**
    a. What are your thoughts on those portrayals?
12. **Overall, how do you think librarians and libraries are being portrayed in coverage or discussions of book challenges?**

Resisting Book Challenges

13. **What do you think is the appropriate response from a librarian to a book challenge?**
    a. What is your policy on book challenges?
    b. Does it depend on what is being challenged?
    c. Does it depend on who is challenging the book?
    d. Does it depend on the location?
    e. Does it depend on the community/political context?
14. **If you have responded to a book challenge, and you haven't explicitly stated this already, did you resist or undermine the book challenge in any way?**
    a. If yes, what did you do? And why?
    b. Do you think you'd respond differently if the challenge were more reasonable/unreasonable? (depends on context of their first response)
15. **If you haven't responded to a book challenge, what do you think you would do if you were confronted with one?**
    a. What if it seemed reasonable?
    b. What if it seemed unreasonable?
16. **Anything we haven't covered that you want to talk about?**

Demographic Questions

17. **Race**
18. **Gender**
19. **Political affiliation (if any)**
20. **Age**
21. **Education**

Appendix B - IRB Approval

Appendix Figure B.1. IRB Approval form

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY | Office of Research Integrity, Compliance and Security

TO: Kevin Steinmetz
Sociology, Anthrop, Social Wrk
Manhattan, KS 66506

Proposal Number IRB-13420

FROM: Lisa Rubin, Chair
Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects

DATE: 01/05/2026

RE: Approval of Proposal Entitled, "Midwest Public Librarians' Perspectives on Book Challenges."

The Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects has reviewed your proposal and has granted full approval. This proposal is **approved for three years from the date of this correspondence.**

APPROVAL DATE: 01/04/2026

EXPIRATION DATE: 01/03/2029

In giving its approval, the Committee has determined that:

No more than minimal risk to subjects

This approval applies only to the proposal currently on file as written. Any change or modification affecting human subjects must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation. All approved proposals are subject to continuing review, which may include the examination of records connected with the project. Announced post-approval monitoring may be performed during the course of this approval period by URCO staff. Injuries, unanticipated problems or adverse events involving risk to subjects or to others must be reported immediately to the Chair of the IRB and / or the URCO.

Electronically signed by Lisa Rubin on 01/05/2026 3:00 PM ET

203 Fairchild Hall, 1601 Vattier St., Manhattan, KS 66506 | 785-532-3224 | fax: 785-532-3278 | comply@k-state.edu