

Public Libraries' Responses to Censorship: Analyzing the Implementation and Effects of Best Practices
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Introduction: This National Leadership Applied Research proposal addresses the IMLS strategic goal of **building the capacity of libraries to improve community well-being by focusing on Objective 2.3**. The lead organization is the University of Kentucky (PI Shannon M. Oltmann), partnering with the University of Illinois (Co-PI Emily J.M. Knox). The total award sought is **\$621,642 over three years with no cost sharing**. There is a need to know *how* public libraries are responding to the sharp increase in book challenges and bans of the past 2 years—whether library materials are being removed from shelves, how libraries explain their actions to their communities, and whether best practices are being followed. The proposal will impact how public libraries respond to materials challenges, which affects the materials that are available for their communities, particularly traditionally marginalized groups.

Project Justification: The rate of challenges to books and other library materials has escalated sharply in 2021-present [1, 2]. Challenges come from parents, grandparents, and even local and state elected officials [3, 4, 5]; most challenges occur in school and public libraries [3]. These challenges have occurred nationwide, in all 50 states. Challenges in the past 18 months have primarily focused on books with authors or characters who are Black, indigenous, or people of color (BIPOC) and/or lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer/questioning (LGBTQ+) [2, 3, 4]. The American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom (ALA OIF) has developed "best practices" for libraries to follow when faced with a materials challenge. These include: require a form to be completed for each individual item challenged; create a committee to consider the challenge; ask the committee to consider the item in its entirety as well as relevant professional reviews; share the committee's decision; formulate an appeals process; and keep the item in the collection while it is being challenged [6, 7]. Despite an increase in the number of challenges, the tireless work of the OIF workers, and an increase in relevant media coverage, there has been *no* systematic study of whether public libraries are following these best practices when faced with a challenge. There are many media reports of libraries not following these practices [8, 9, 10], but we do not know the proportion of libraries doing so. Further, we do not know the impacts on communities of (not) following ALA OIF best practices.

Research Questions and Theoretical Framework: This project aims to address the following research questions: Do public library directors know what the OIF best practices are? When library materials are challenged, how often are OIF best practices followed, and to what extent are they followed? What are the impacts of (not) following OIF best practices on libraries' communities? What actions (with respect to book challenges) best serve public libraries' communities? Theoretically, we will adapt *knowledge translation* (KT) from the medical field [11, 12]. KT "refers to the synthesis, exchange, dissemination, and ethically sound application of knowledge" [14]. KT particularly focuses on the translation of knowledge from research into practice (and the dialogue therein) [13, 14]. Here, we are examining KT from ALA OIF to public libraries across the U.S. In a paper cited over 4,700 times, [13] proposed a knowledge-to-action model that encompasses a cycle of action steps that occur in/for KT: identify the problem; adapt knowledge to the local context; assess barriers to knowledge use; select, tailor, and implement interventions; monitor knowledge use; evaluate outcomes; and sustain knowledge use. We anticipate adapting this model for library science, to better analyze the transfer of knowledge from ALA OIF to local public libraries.

Project Work Plan: This proposal has three stages, each lasting one year. In the **first stage**, we will gather data about challenges to public library materials that occurred from January 2021 through June 2023; our primary sources will be the compilation of challenges from OIF and the *Journal of Intellectual Freedom and Privacy* (the PI is past editor of this journal and the other researcher is the current editor), supplemented by news media stories and reports from PEN America and EveryLibrary. In addition, we will ask the Advisory Board (see below) for suggestions on finding additional data. We anticipate hundreds of libraries will be included in this data set, which will consist of public libraries that have faced challenges; we will use this data in next phase of the research. In the **second stage**, we will contact the library directors who have faced challenges in 2021-2023 (from the first

stage) and request interviews. The interviews will be qualitative, semi-structured, using a standard interview guide. We will design the interview questions based on the data we uncover in stage one and with guidance from the Advisory Board. We will use their expertise to develop the interview questions and validate the guide. For example, we might ask if books other than those publicly reported were challenged; how long it took to respond to the challenge(s); the steps the director took in responding to the challenge(s); and how satisfied they are with the outcome. We will conduct up to 40 interviews (or until saturation), ensuring respondents vary by geography and size of library. We will record, transcribe, and analyze these interviews for key themes and findings, using an iterative, team-based coding approach. For example, we expect to find how libraries responded to challenges, commonalities across challenged books, and the outcome of challenges (which is sometimes not reported in the media). We will share these findings with our Advisory Board to help put our findings in perspective and authenticate the results. In the **third stage**, we will create a survey based on the key themes and findings from the interviews, again with the assistance of our Advisory Board. For example, we may have a question that lists ways that libraries responded to challenges and a question that asks respondents whether they contacted the ALA OIF during the challenge. We will have both closed and open-ended questions in the survey. We will distribute this survey nationwide to public library directors using email listservs, regional/state library associations (such as the Kentucky Library Association and the Mountain Plains Library Association), and the assistance of our Advisory Board. They will help us circulate and promote the survey. Because some libraries do not report challenges publicly, in this stage, we expand beyond the data set from the first stage, to capture a wider range of experiences and perspectives. We will collect and analyze this quantitative survey data with the assistance of a University of Kentucky (UK) statistician and use our Advisory Board to reflect on and substantiate our findings.

Diversity Plan: One PI is a member of the LGBTQ+ community and the other researcher is a member of the BIPOC community. In addition, our Advisory Board will include members who are BIPOC/LGBTQ+ and/or who have particular expertise in reaching and serving these communities. We will particularly reach out to traditionally marginalized communities through groups such as REFORMA, BCALA, and the ALA Rainbow Round Table to disseminate our interview request, our survey, and our findings. This Advisory Board will also help us design our interview guide and survey, as well as validating the results. The Board will be formed once we receive funding, based on recommendations from experts in the field.

Project Results: Each stage of the project will generate data which will be shared in the following ways: both academic and professional trade publications (such as *American Libraries* and *Public Libraries*) with national impact and presentations at conferences such as the American Library Association, the Public Library Association Conference, the conference for the Association for Rural and Small Libraries, and state library conferences. We will also make the anonymized survey data available online (via our research team's website). We will work with ALA OIF to update and improve the best practices, based on what libraries are actually doing and the steps that they report are most effective. These guidelines will be shared nationally through state library associations, email listservs, and conferences. Finally, we will also host (and record for later distribution) a webinar/online training that explains the guidelines; that emphasizes the need for defending intellectual freedom; and that encourage libraries to adopt the guidelines in their responses. We anticipate that the guidelines and webinar will help public libraries better defend their collections and serve their communities. As challenges are occurring across the US, this will have a national impact.

Budget Summary: The requested budget is for \$623,242 over three years. This includes \$105,508 for salary/benefits for Dr. Oltmann, \$12,724 for the salary/fringe for a University of Kentucky (UK) statistician, \$10,000 for Dr. Oltmann to travel to conferences, \$6,000 for transcription services, \$1,080 for software and supplies, \$1,500 for the Advisory Board, \$8 as a waste recovery fee, and \$85,765 for UK's F&A/indirect expenses. The University of Illinois will also receive a subaward for \$400,656, which will cover Dr. Knox's time and that of a Ph.D. Research Assistant, as well as other associated costs such as fringe and indirect.

References: https://docs.google.com/document/d/18YnrQR57I_FdBZI2pau_CXNVJ4pdqr4N/edit