Libraries and Censorship at the Onset of the Second Trump Administration

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1. Introduction to the Issue

Libraries as institutions are currently experiencing existential threats. Book bans and challenges to intellectual freedom in libraries are not new; however, they began accelerating in 2021, primarily because of campaigns by community groups and supported by conservative think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation and the Claremont Institute. A report by PEN America tracks how state legislation "facilitate(d) bans on thousands of books that touch on issues including race, sexuality, and gender," and noted that the Heritage Foundation encouraged and capitalized on the new laws with its *Project 2025 Presidential Transition Project*. They went on to explain that "Project 2025's expansive language indicates that its overall goal is a set of ideological bans that apply across the nation…" which would "impose ideological restrictions on teaching and learning" (Tager, 2024). During the first four months of 2025, the time during which this survey research was conducted, library censorship transitioned from the local and state level to the federal level. For instance, under the Trump administration, censorship efforts expanded into federal governmental litigation, legislation, and administrative arenas, and President Trump issued executive orders aimed at fundamentally reworking the purpose of the federal government and its institutions. At time of this writing, libraries remain targets of these changes, and the effects continue unfolding. For librarians, these dramatic events are occurring alongside the daily work they do to maintain libraries as collective community and institutional resources.

At their core, libraries are democratic institutions that facilitate intellectual freedom by helping community members access information and services that are essential to a democratic society. In a recent interview, former Librarian of Congress Carla Hayden said "libraries have been called the cornerstone of democracy.… They're free, anyone can walk through the doors and with the assurance that what they're asking for… would not be shared with anyone else is really a pillar of democracy" (Asuaje, 2025). In its Freedom to Read Statement, the American Library Association (ALA) builds on that sentiment and asserts that "free communication is essential to the preservation of a free society.… The people should have the freedom to read and consider a broader range of ideas than those that may be held by any single librarian or publisher or government or church" (American Library Association, 2006). Library workers play key roles in these efforts. In her 2024 essay, *The Library is a Commons*, former American Library Association President Emily Drabinski explains:

> "Library workers are the people who decide whether to pull a book with gay characters from the shelves in response to a challenge. We are the people who host the Drag Queen Story Hour and collect books about Black history, even when such actions produce a storm of public controversy. Such actions secure the right to read, book by book, reader by reader.… (And we) also secure public institutions, public resources and public ownership of the public good."

The political environment and actions such as executive orders starting in January 2025 produced a pivotal moment for documenting the experiences of librarians. Indeed, the Trump administration's use of federal authority to enact systemic change in academic and library institutions directly threatens the historical mission of libraries. It was important to document this time to offer a baseline for experiences, gauge the impact on intellectual freedom in academic institutions as well as on librarians' mental health, and to point the way for future additional research.

This issue brief offers a baseline for understanding the experiences of school librarians and academic librarians during the early months of the second Trump administration by sharing the results of a short survey of high school and college librarians regarding their experiences with censorship and climate at their institutions. The survey was completed between February and April 2025, and questions related to issues like censorship, challenges to materials, and the intellectual freedom climate comprised one part of a larger survey about librarian experiences. This time coincides with the Trump administration's numerous executive orders and policy changes affecting schools, libraries, and federal institutions. The sections below offer an overview of the issue including the specific 2025 executive orders affecting libraries, examine what we know from the scholarly literature, and analyze the findings of the survey.

2. Overview: Libraries, Censorship, and Librarian Harassment

Library professionals have long focused on the issue of censorship. As far back as 1939, the American Library Association created *The Library Bill of Rights* in response to censorship in the U.S. and abroad prior to World War II (American Library Association, 2019). The ALA and the American Association of Publishers later reaffirmed these rights in 1953 with their *Freedom to Read* statement in response to another increase in censorship due to McCarthyism (American Library Association, 2006).

Censorship increased during the rise of the MAGA movement in the U.S. and accelerated as part of the parents' rights movement, which emerged in 2021 as a reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns (Gruver, 2021). The ideological foundation for recent library censorship was laid over several years by a combination of right-wing pundits and think tanks. For instance, the Heritage Foundation created a roadmap for, in part, changing the mission of libraries as community institutions in their *Project 2025 Presidential Transition Project* (The Heritage Foundation, 2023). National right-wing individuals and organizations such as Daily Wire contributor Matt Walsh, Manhattan Institute fellow Christopher Rufo, the parent group Moms for Liberty, and the social media account Libs of TikTok used social media to attack Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) policies and initiatives, which promote the equal treatment of all people, regardless of their race, sexuality, or ability status. It is well established that recent examples of these attacks included campaigns demanding that diverse titles be censored in public and school libraries, harassing LGBTQ+ teachers and creators on social media and in person, demanding lawmakers reverse previous DEI related laws, and pressuring institutions to drop DEI programs (Anti-Defamation League Center on Extremism, 2023). The strategy reflected a multi-pronged effort, utilizing public pressure campaigns, overloading libraries with book reconsideration requests, introducing legislation to restrict book access, changing state budgets to defund libraries, and harassing individual teachers and librarians.

Although national figures and organizations set the anti-DEI tone, it quickly trickled down to local groups such as the Citizens for a New Louisiana and Awake IL. While diverse books were targeted for removal, right-wing groups also smeared individual librarians to force them into complicity with the censorship. In one example, Louisiana school librarian Amanda Jones wrote a book about her experience of being harassed and called a pedophile and groomer. She was also part of a group of library workers featured in the recent documentary *The Librarians* who face similar harassment. Librarian and organizer Mariame Kaba makes the point that "the current right-wing attack on not just books, but curators of books, is meant to erode that moral authority, and to force librarians to either join in targeting LGBT and Black people or join them in facing state sanctions and state and community violence. The goal of the right is to use moral panic to transform libraries from public spaces aspiring to equality and empowerment into just another site of carceral violence" (Kaba, 2025). Indeed, the intentional targeting of librarians was part of the strategy. Between 2021 to 2024, censorship was championed by quasi-political and ideological organizations; however, the suppression was about to make the leap to official government policy.

2.1 Executive Orders, Libraries, and Academic Institutions

From the start of his second term in January 2025, President Trump quickly initiated his ambitious program to dismantle a wide array of progressive laws and policies that had their roots in the Civil Rights Movement (Hannah-Jones, 2025). Swift changes came in the form of executive orders, including four that specifically affect libraries and academic institutions. The first is EO 14168, *Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government*, issued January 30, 2025. This order instructs federal agencies to recognize only traditional, binary biological sex as a concept and category and deems expressions of gender identity as "extremist" and deviant. It effectively erases transgender and non-binary individuals' existence as a class from recognition by the federal government. The order asserts that "gender identity… cannot be recognized as a replacement for sex" (Executive Office of the President, 2025a), excising any reference or acknowledgement of transgender or non-binary people in government policy, guidance, communications, and documents. The order has placed the federal government in direct conflict with a core mission of libraries, which is to offer diverse texts that reflect the range of human experiences, including those of LGBTQ individuals. This order can potentially impact federal funding for libraries that offer such diverse texts. This order, while in practice directing federal agencies to change policy language, could ultimately result in censorship of LGBTQ titles and programs at libraries of all types.

The second was EO 14185, *Restoring America's Fighting Force*, issued February 3, 2025. Part of this executive order directs the Department of Defense to remove any materials from schools or military academies that reference diversity, anti-racism, or gender issues. This led to books related to those topics being pulled off the shelves for review and curriculum being changed or eliminated at Department of Defense K-12 schools and higher education military academies (PBS News, 2025). While many books were originally marked for possible removal at the Naval Academy (United States Navy Chief of Information, 2025), as of July 2025 it is unclear if they have been permanently removed. The Department of Defense established an Academic Libraries Committee that issued guidance on how to review academy library materials and search terms to use when looking for titles to remove. The terms include gender identity, critical race theory, diversity, equity and inclusion, and white privilege (U.S. Department of Defense, 2025). Books removed at the K-12 Department of Defense Schools are the subject of an ongoing lawsuit brought by the ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union, 2025) and include *Gender Queer* by Maia Kobabe and *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* by Ibram X. Kendi (*E.K. vs. Department of Defense Education Activity*, 2025).

The third was EO 14195, *Ending Radical Indoctrination in America's Schooling*, issued February 3, 2025, which similarly targets materials, curriculum, and programs about diversity, anti-racism, and gender in public schools. This order directs numerous agencies, including the Department of Education, to eliminate funding for programs supportive of DEI. This order also specifically directs the Attorney General to pursue criminalization of adults who support transgender students (Executive Office of the President, 2025b). It is easy to see the connection between this executive order and the

Heritage Foundation's *Project 2025* that attempts to reclassify books or materials with transgender or LGBTQ themes as pornography. The *Project 2025* document insists that the government should label "educators and librarians…" who use such materials as "registered sex offenders" (The Heritage Foundation, 2023).

The fourth was EO 14238, *Continuing the Reduction of Federal Bureaucracy*, issued March 20, 2025 (Executive Office of the President, 2025d). This order has the potential to directly affect libraries through its proposal to eliminate grants and services of the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS) which is one of the main agencies responsible for distributing federal money earmarked for libraries. This executive order directs the Institute to "reduce the performance of [its] statutory functions and associated personnel to the minimum presence and function required by law" (Executive Office of the President, 2025d). In addition to targeting the IMLS for reduction of services via this executive order in March 2025, in May the Trump administration proposed shuttering the agency entirely in the draft FY2026 budget submitted to Congress (Weinberg, 2025). If the either the reduction or the closure goes through, the domino effect will mean some libraries will close due to lack of funding, librarian positions will be cut, programs such as broadband services and interlibrary loan will be lost, and resources like databases will no longer be available (Akmon, 2025).

2.2 Additional Trump Administration Changes Impacting Libraries and Librarians

Other recent actions included firing Dr. Carla Hayden, the Librarian of Congress. By federal statute, the Librarian of Congress is appointed by the President with the advice and consent of Congress. The position encompasses both executive branch and legislative branch priorities. Dr. Hayden is known as a champion of free speech and library independence. She is a past president of the American Library Association and, in 2003, advocated against censorship and surveillance written into the USA PATRIOT Act (Weigand, 2016). While it is legal for the President to replace this position, the motivation for her removal seems to be to replace her as an advocate for intellectual freedom and to consolidate power in the executive branch (Weinberg, 2025).

In other developments under the second Trump administration, the Department of Education ended investigations of previous book banning incidents, signaled it will not open any new investigations, and eliminated the 'book ban coordinator' position, whose job it was to assist schools in navigating book ban attempts and to strengthen first amendment protections within schools. In addition, the Department issued a statement declaring book bans a 'hoax' (Dunbar, 2025). These federal actions enacted censorship as the official government policy and functioned to consolidate power over information in the executive branch.

2.3 Brief Review of Scholarly Literature

Due to the rapid institution of federal censorship policies in 2025, scholarly literature has yet to catch up to the swift evolution in policies — because these executive orders are so recent, there hasn't been enough time to complete in-depth studies on their effects. However, scholars have examined the effects of censorship on K-12 and academic librarians in recent years. For instance, a qualitative design and critical discourse analysis that investigated the experiences of K-12 teachers and librarians with book banning and curriculum censorship in South Carolina public schools between September 2024 and January 2025 found that "...South Carolina educators fear the systemic changes against intellectual freedom occurring in their schools. They are frustrated with the evolving ideological and political battles over instructional materials that, while not entirely new for education, have elevated to crisis status" (Gallman, 2025). The study found that the librarians reported a surprisingly high rate of self-censorship, often in advance of official policies or directives. Gallman observes that perhaps "the culture of fear that results from censorship may be more motivating than the censorship itself" (Gallman, 2025).

Additionally, a journal article by three academic librarians unpacks examples of recent state-level legislation and librarian approaches to dealing with censorship. Published just before the change in federal administration, even the title "On Defense: Academic Librarians in DEI Battleground States" seems a harbinger of national times to come (Birch, Howard, Schiavone, & Nolan, 2024). The authors explored the experiences of higher education librarians with censorship and their approach to resisting anti-DEI mandates in different states, and it's worth examining these examples. For instance, an academic librarian in Kentucky shares the potential difficulty in fulfilling her role as a librarian if state legislation passes to disband DEI programs. Past projects such as library community outreach to Black owned businesses could potentially expose her to legal risk. She sees that "the manipulation of DEI and intellectual freedom vocabulary" and the rise of anti-DEI legislation "is a threat not only to my outreach and engagement activities as a librarian and my ability to educate as a faculty member but also to our freedom and democracy as the United States of America" (Birch et al., 2024, p.106). Another author in the article, a librarian in a small college in Wisconsin, shared her concerns with censorship and anti-DEI legislation, both in terms of her role as a librarian and the effect on students. Her approach is to double down on weaving DEI into all aspects of the library, including instruction and programming, and to work together as a community to uphold intellectual freedom on campus (Birch et al., 2024, p. 107). A third librarian focused on the more complete elimination of DEI in the Florida higher education system. She shared that "statewide anti-DEI reactionary politics have caused a palpably chilling effect on Florida higher education" (Birch et al., 2024, p. 107). One way she dealt with the mounting censorship pressure and its dissonance to her role as a librarian was to help organize a teach-in by students about Black history and censorship in Florida. She observed that students are looking to libraries as a safe space during this time and are "judging how true our public commitments to DEI were" (Birch et al, p. 107). She encourages creativity in responding to censorship and declares that "it is more important than ever for libraries to remain the loudest defenders of marginalized students and intellectual freedom" (Birch et al., 2024, p. 108).

3. About the Research: Librarian Survey

This study includes findings from a short 23-question survey of school librarians and academic librarians conducted from February to April 2025. The survey was completed by 46 school librarians and 19 academic librarians. Several rounds of participant recruitment occurred from mid-February to mid-April, and the survey request was distributed through both my personal and professional networks. Although the findings reflect a relatively small number of participants, it was important to close the survey in April to capture the baseline experiences of librarians during the first few months of the second Trump administration's policies. The survey results were tabulated, and open-response questions were analyzed qualitatively. As a researcher, my positionality offers assets that I brought to this analysis. For instance, I am a public-school librarian in an urban setting, and I have experience engaging with policies targeting censorship in schools and libraries. During the project I also reflected on my positionality and acknowledged any potential biases I may hold about libraries and librarian work.

4. Findings: Challenges to Materials and Intellectual Freedom Climate

The findings are organized in two sections: First, relevant survey responses from high school librarians are analyzed, including a narrative about the answers to open-response questions. Second, responses from academic librarians are examined, again with a narrative analyzing the answers to open-response questions.

4.1 Responses from High School Librarians

Have you experienced challenges to materials on racism / BIPOC identities in the past year?		
N=46	#	%
Yes	3	6%
No	43	94%

Have you experienced challenges to LGBTQ+ materials in the past year?		
N=46	#	%
Yes	6	13%
No	40	87%

How would you characterize the current intellectual freedom climate for library workers in your *state*? 1 very hostile to 10 very supportive	
Rank	# of librarians
10	7
9	8
8	12
7	10
6	3
5	0
4	2
3	3
2	1
1	0
Total	46

How would you characterize the current intellectual freedom climate for library workers in your *school district*? 1 very hostile to 10 very supportive	
Rank	# of librarians
10	14
9	12
8	6
7	6
6	1
5	4
4	2
3	1
2	0
1	0
Total	46

In total, 46 school librarians completed the survey. Among them, 96% of respondents were librarians at public schools, and 68% reported working at a Title I school. About 77% reported having one certified librarian on campus. Six out of the 46 school librarians (13%) reported experiencing challenges to LGBTQ+ materials during the past year (2024-early 2025). Additionally, three school librarian respondents (6%) reported experiencing challenges to materials about racism/BIPOC identities. On a scale of 1-10, with 1 being very hostile and 10 being very supportive, nearly 60% of school librarians characterized the intellectual freedom climate for library workers in their state as in the 8-10 range at the time of this survey, suggesting highly supportive. However, almost 9% of respondents characterized the intellectual freedom climate for library workers in their state as in the 1-3 range, reflecting more hostility. However, when the same scale was applied to the intellectual freedom climate at the school district level, nearly 70% of school librarians reported support along the 8-10 range, while only 1 respondent perceived their school district as more hostile and in the 1-3 range.

In their open-response answers, several participants echoed the idea that pushback to LGBTQ materials is sometimes simply about which books can and cannot be on display in school libraries. One participant shared, "I had a parent tell me that I was exposing students to my 'gay agenda'... this was in response to LGBTQI+ focused programming and library displays." Many school librarians noted differences between what books they could have in their collections versus what books were allowed to be on display. For instance, several librarians specifically shared that books such as *Gender Queer*

or *Project 1619* could be in their collections, but these books could *not* be included in library displays or reading lists. A few librarians even reported that administrators asked them not to order certain texts, and one respondent revealed they even received a list of materials about race to review from a FOIA request.

It's important to note that challenges to school library materials also came from outside entities, meaning from people not connected to the school. For instance, one librarian shared an example of a complaint they received from homeschooling parents whose children were not part of their school. The librarian shared,

> "A homeschool parent challenged our students having access to research databases (Gale, EBSCO). This parent doesn't even have a kid in our school but was upset that a friend's child chose to write on an LGBTQ topic for their research paper. They wrote a letter to the board instead of filing a reconsideration of materials form for the library."

One of the key differences in the data about the experiences of school librarians and academic librarians seems to be reflected in the ages of students they serve. Although school librarians may face pushback from parents or others who are concerned about materials available to youth, this was less of a concern among academic librarians at the time of this survey. In fact, most did not report experiencing challenges to LGBTQ or BIPOC materials, with some sharing that any uncertainty in their jobs seemed "more related to budget challenges or changing enrollments." However, an interesting finding emerged. As librarians in higher education settings, they serve a range of students, including those who are in graduate, professional, or credential programs. Several librarians reported hearing about challenges that their students were dealing with at the school sites where they worked. For instance, one librarian reported that while they themselves hadn't experienced challenges to books or materials, "my students have in their respective school libraries." Another respondent noted that their "students have experienced issues of book challenges," and that the respondent is involved in "advocacy work to fight against book banning."

Below are the data from academic/college librarians. In total, 19 academic librarians completed the survey. Among them, 58% of respondents were librarians at public 4-year institutions, 26% reported working at private 4-year institutions, and 16% were at community colleges.

4.2 Responses from Academic Librarians

Have you experienced challenges to LGBTQ+ materials in the past year?		
N=19	#	%
Yes	0	0%
No	19	100%

Have you experienced challenges to materials on racism / BIPOC identities in the past year?		
N=19	#	%
Yes	0	0%
No	19	100%

How would you characterize the current intellectual freedom climate for library workers in your *state*? 1 very hostile to 10 very supportive	
Rank	# of librarians
10	3
9	1
8	4
7	3
6	4
5	2
4	1
3	0
2	0
1	1
Total	19

How would you characterize the current intellectual freedom climate for library workers in your *institution*? 1 very hostile to 10 very supportive	
Rank	# of librarians
10	3
9	3
8	8
7	4
6	1
5	0
4	0
3	0
2	0
1	0
Total	19

When asked to characterize the intellectual freedom climate for library workers in their state, at the time of this survey, 42% of respondents reported answers in the 8-10 range, suggesting a highly supportive climate. About 53% were in the middle, reporting 4-7 on the 1-10 scale, and 5% of respondents in the 1-3 range, signaling a more hostile intellectual freedom climate. When asked the same question regarding perceived intellectual freedom climate at their institutions, 74% of responses were in the 8-10 range, suggesting a highly supportive climate at their campuses, while 26% of responses were in the middle range of 6-7. Zero respondents reported responses below this range.

One distinct way in which academic librarians saw students being affected by recent shifts in the political climate was through fear about including their written work in online repositories. One librarian shared multiple examples of students requesting to remove or redact their work. For instance, "a former student told me to remove her dissertation from our institutional repository because she was afraid in the current political climate that her LGBTQ+ [participants] would be identifiable in some way even though the data were anonymized." In another example, a student requested that her dissertation not be made public "due to the sensitive nature of the topic (about BIPOC social justice)… [she] demanded that it be removed from the open access series in the repository." These comments suggest a sense of fear among students stemming from making their research available to the public. This is not surprising, as among respondents, two people reported already being targeted or receiving harassment connected to their role as librarians. Another participant simply wrote that while they didn't face direct impacts yet, "I am aware that this is changing. IMLS was just targeted. Education funding is being targeted."

The academic institutions themselves also reflect the impact of the political climate on the experiences of librarians. For instance, one participant shared that during the previous year they worked at what they described as a "very liberal, independent boarding high school that was highly supportive of DEI initiatives where I had to think carefully about bringing in right-of-center titles." The next year they switched jobs and now work "as an instructional librarian at a large public university library that is now being forced to strip DEI support from its HR infrastructure." This participant described the difference as "surreal" and noted the difference in being at a job where "there's subtle censorship of conservative ideas to a job where there's blatant censorship going on for liberal ideas!" Relatedly, nearly 60% of academic librarians reported attending professional development sessions about issues related to censorship or free speech. Similarly to school librarians, most trainings were offered by the American Library Association, state libraries, consortiums, or their academic institution.

At the time of this survey, most respondents had not yet experienced a direct impact on their funding, but three librarians already reported experiencing cuts or threats of cuts to library faculty positions. Several librarians also reported that the U.S. Department of Education's January 2025 actions — including the dismissal of student and parent complaints of censorship, its assertion that book bans are a hoax, and the subsequent dismissal of the assistant secretary tasked with outreach around censorship — were currently impacting their work. One respondent wrote that "every moment feels like an existential threat. It's become the water we live in…" Another librarian noted that the "general climate has deteriorated" which has led to living in a time when there are questions about "the value of libraries generally."

However, at some institutions the changes to policy and executive orders were encouraging librarians to spring into action and create plans for the future. As one librarian shared, "these events have prompted us in my library to use meeting time to discuss the things happening elsewhere and engage in scenario planning for if it might happen to us." The developments have required librarians to change the direction of some of their work, but in a way that in this case is a coordinated, organized response and effort to proactively plan for censorship counter measures. Indeed, the increase in political action targeting books or libraries encouraged several respondents to become more involved. One librarian noted that "recent book bans, attempted book bans, anti-LGBT sentiments toward libraries have inspired me to run for public library board of trustees to ensure equal access for all patrons to all materials." Some librarians also shared their longtime involvement in these issues, such as the respondent who shared that in 2016, they "were part of the team that created the intellectual freedom manual for our state library association," which won an award for intellectual freedom initiatives from ALA. Another participant noted that they speak to high school classes and answer questions about "book banning and its harm on education."

5. Implications and Ideas for Future Inquiry

These survey results give us a glimpse into the experiences of school librarians and academic librarians during the first few months of 2025 and offer a baseline for understanding how these experiences may change as new policies and executive orders are implemented. This issue brief suggests the need for future research about libraries and the effects of the Trump administration and the executive orders. More in-depth studies could be conducted into the changes in library policies and services at all types of libraries, including academic, research, and public institutions. Additionally, the survey raises questions about the impact of overwork, culture wars, and harassment on librarians. One idea includes a long-term study on the impact of this time on library worker mental health. Another idea is a detailed investigation into the effects of the executive orders and federal changes on the degrees of censorship in different states. Lastly, researchers could study how institutions are responding to censorship efforts and how these responses affect students, library workers, and general faculty.

In addition to scholarly research, libraries and adjacent organizations can offer library workers and patrons information on the practical effects of the changes on intellectual freedom. The ALA has done this on a national level with its Office of Intellectual Freedom. State library associations and consortiums can also monitor events in their areas, share developments and effects, and assess needs of local library workers and users.

6. Conclusion

This issue brief intentionally documents the early months of 2025 as a distinct moment in time to serve as a comparison point for the future. However, times are already rapidly changing, and librarians are already engaging in the work necessary to continue supporting students. The following example is one such bright spot. After the survey concluded, the Association of Illinois School Library Educators (AISLE), in conjunction with two regional library systems, Reaching Across Illinois Libraries (RAILS) and the Illinois Heartland Library Association, hosted a virtual mixer open to academic and school librarians across the state. Among the key discussions were sharing the concerns of academic librarians who were worried about parent challenges when working with high school youth, the use of permission slips to help indemnify librarians from legal repercussions, and questions about data for book challenges policies. Participants talked over information about changes at the federal level and strategies for dealing with censorship at the local level. Indeed, librarians are at the heart of important work that is already occurring to combat present day challenges and continue supporting students and their right to read and access information.

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