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Analyzing Challenges to Library Materials: An Incomplete Picture

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ABSTRACT

This research project used Freedom of Information requests to obtain public records from Alabama institutions about challenges to materials in public schools and public libraries. Challenges occur when a patron objects to certain content. In this analysis, we examine the records of challenges. The research questions were as follows: How many challenges occur in public schools and libraries? What is the nature of these challenges? Are there institutional or demographic factors that are correlated to the occurrence of challenges? In this exploratory study, the number of reported challenges was surprisingly low. We investigated whether reported challenges were related to certain institutional or demographic factors, but did not find any discernible relationships. The data suggest that most challenged material is retained, but that librarians may be self-censoring to reduce controversy in their collections.

Introduction

As Knox (2014a) notes, intellectual freedom and opposition to censorship is a core component of contemporary U.S. librarianship. Similarly, Foster and McMenemy (2012) found that intellectual freedom was a core value of librarianship internationally (along with other core values, including service, privacy, equity of access, and stewardship). Intellectual freedom can be seen primarily as opposition to censorship. Although intellectual freedom is considered a core value (see Gorman 2000), relatively little systematic, scholarly research has studied it.

In the research reported here, we examined the nature of censorship in public libraries and public schools, through the lens of "challenges" to materials (see below). We sought information from over 350 institutions about challenges and their resolution (whether the item challenged was kept, relocated, or removed, for example). We examined whether challenges are associated with particular institutional or demographic characteristics. Below, we briefly describe the relevant literature and our methodology. The

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results section is an extensive exploration of the data we collected; in the discussion section, we suggest how the data may be interpreted.

Literature review

Censorship

Intner (2004) defines censorship as "the systematic and deliberate exclusion of materials that would be considered protected speech" (p. 8). Similarly, the American Library Association explains that censorship is "the suppression of ideas and information that certain persons—individuals, groups or government officials—find objectionable or dangerous" (American Library Association 2016b, p. 3). Both of these definitions emphasize that censorship restricts access to information. When materials "are removed or kept from public access…[or] restricted to particular audiences, based on their age or other characteristics, " censorship has occurred (American Library Association 2016b, p. 4). Moody (2005) takes a broader view, arguing that censorship "encompasses those actions which significantly restrict free access to information" (p. 139). Censorship, of course, can occur in a variety of institutions and settings, but here we focus on public libraries and public schools, quintessential public institutions. As Dresang (2006) notes, more than 90 percent of the documented challenges to materials take place in public libraries and schools.

Conversely, intellectual freedom "is the right of every individual to both seek and receive information from all points of view without restriction. It provides for free access to all expressions of ideas through which any and all sides of a question, cause or movement may be explored" (American Library Association 2016b, p. 1).

Relatively little systematic, scholarly research on censorship and challenges exists in the current literature. *Library Trends* published a special issue in 2014, examining the very public and controversial challenges in West Bend, Wisconsin (Latham and Jones 2014; Zimmer and McCleer 2014). Dresang (2006) explains that "it is difficult for an academic researcher to write confidently about the state of intellectual freedom in relation to libraries because very little scholarly, data-based research exists that would inform a comprehensive analysis about the contemporary situation" (p. 171). In addition, Knox (2014a) notes that "perhaps the most common type of research on intellectual freedom and censorship is written by practitioners and consists primarily of case studies and reflective essays" (p. 16); see also Harkovitch, Hirst, and Loomis (2003, p. 368).

Mechanisms of censorship

There are a few paths that censorship can take in these organizations. First, it may be dictated by law or regulation. For example, some librarians consider internet filtering to be a form of censorship, but it is mandated by the

Children's Internet Protection Act for any public library or school receiving certain federal funds. Some locales may have additional laws about particular library materials, such as restricting minors' access to sexual content.

Second, librarians may decide to limit access (by, for example, keeping potentially controversial content behind the desk, or by not purchasing materials they suspect would be controversial in their communities). This is often labeled "self-censorship" and may be rampant across the librarian profession. Moody (2004) says that 20 percent of librarians avoid purchasing problematic items in her survey of Australian librarians. However, Whelan (2009) reports that 70 percent of surveyed U.S. school librarians reported self-censoring content to avoid controversy. Knox (2014b), reviewing relevant literature, concludes that librarians are "often negligent in upholding intellectual freedom for all" (p. 14). Nonetheless, it is unclear just how often self-censorship occurs or for what reasons. As Downing (2013) notes, librarians can often rationalize other reasons (other than censorship) for not selecting items.

The third route of censorship in public libraries and schools starts with patrons raising a challenge to particular content. The ALA defines a challenge as

> an attempt to remove or restrict materials, based upon the objections of a person or group. Challenges do not simply involve a person expressing a point of view; rather, they are an attempt to remove material from the curriculum or library, thereby restricting the access of others. (American Library Association 2016a, p. 2)

Most public libraries and schools, in their policy manuals, have formal policies and procedures to follow when material is challenged. Most procedures involve the complainant completing a form, then having the material in question reviewed by a director, an administrator, a committee, or the board; a ruling about the dispensation of the material will then be issued. The ALA, as well as many state library agencies, offers detailed guidance on such processes online and through the Office of Intellectual Freedom (OIF) (Oltmann 2016; Preer 2014).

Background on the current study

In the United States, "the governance of each public library today takes place within the interlocking contexts of local, regional, state, and national political jurisdictions" (McCook 2011, p. 101). Generally, public libraries are established at a city or county level, with a board of trustees, and a taxing authority to obtain funding; financial assistance may also come from regional, state, or federal levels. For example, the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) provides numerous grants each year to various agencies, including many public libraries; funding comes through the Library Services and Technology Act (McCook 2011).

The research described here is the first stage of a larger research project designed to gather data about challenges, collection development, censorship, and internet filtering from public libraries and schools across the United States. The exploratory, qualitative work at this stage of the project focused on challenges in public schools and libraries.

We used the state-level freedom of information laws (FOI; also called open records or sunshine laws) to gain access to records and information from public school and libraries. FOI laws generally state that public institutions (and government agencies) must open their records to members of the public upon request (see Oltmann et al. 2015, for more details). Because public schools and libraries are public institutions, their records are available to the public; all one must do is cite the FOI law and request certain records (the requests cannot be too broad or vague). The agencies are required by law to comply with such requests.

Alabama is one of the fifty U.S. states, located in the southeast region. We chose to start with Alabama to test the viability of using FOI laws as a research tool for this project and, because it is first alphabetically, it provides a convenient starting place. However, Alabama has a particularly weak FOI law (Code of Alabama 1975, S36-12–40); there is no mandated timeframe for replies and no penalties for non-compliance.

Research questions

Based on the literature review, it is clear that we lack systematic knowledge about challenges in public schools and public libraries. Thus, this research is exploratory, beginning to address this gap in the literature. The research questions include as follows:

- How many challenges occur in public schools and libraries?
- What is the nature of these challenges?
- Are there institutional or demographic factors that are correlated to the occurrence of challenges?

Methods

To learn about challenges in Alabama, we sent an FOI request via postal mail to every public library and public school district in the state—a total of 351 institutions (see Oltmann et al. 2015). The letter we sent referenced the Alabama Public Records law and asked for the following information: complaints, requests, and/or challenges for removal, reclassification, and/or reconsideration of publications since January 1, 2003; any current collection or curriculum development policy or policies governing your institution(s); and any records related to Internet filtering.

Table 1. Number of challenges by institution.

Institution	Number of challenges
Alpha Public Library	7
Beta Public Library	5
Gamma Public Library	5
Delta Public Library	3
Epsilon Public Library	3
Zeta Public Library	3
Eta Public Library	2
Theta Public Library	2
Iota Public Library	2
Kappa Public School System	2
Lambda Public Library	1
Mu Public School System	1
Nu Public Library	1
Xi Public Library	1

From the 351 requests, we received responses from 222 institutions: 84 public schools and 138 public libraries for an overall response rate of 63.1 percent. However, these numbers can be somewhat misleading. Some responses were merely refusals to comply with the FOI request, while others asked for more time, for remuneration (which is legally allowed), or for more information. After nine months of sending reminders and following up with the institutions, 104 public libraries and 65 public schools sent responsive records—in other words, 169 total institutions responded in such a way that at least part of the request was answered; nine institutions answered every part of the request (this low number is probably due to the extensive, multi-part nature of the request). The institutions have been given pseudonyms (see Table 1) to shield them.[1] In the following section, we include data from additional sources: data about public libraries was pulled from the Public Libraries Survey, Fiscal Year 2013, conducted by the IMLS, demographic information about communities was compiled from the 2010 U.S. Census, and information about religious adherence came from the Association of Religious Data Archives.

Results

Several analyses followed from this data; here, we focus on the challenges reported by the responding institutions. Fourteen total institutions (two public school systems and 12 public libraries) reported that they had received one or more challenge between 2003–2013 (see Table 1). One institution reported six challenges during this period; the total number of challenges was 38 and the mean number reported was 2.7. As this covers a ten-year period, the overall number of records reported by responsive institutions seems quite low.

In fact, the OIF reported that they received notification of 52 challenges from 43 Alabama institutions during the ten-year period. Furthermore, their records indicate challenges were reported by 42 schools and only one public library (James LaRue personal communication, 2016). Thus, we must be aware that our data pool is incomplete. It is not known why fewer challenges were reported in our project since our goal was comprehensive coverage and mandatory responses from the institutions.

Analysis of challenges

Of the 38 challenges reported, one was about a blocked website, four were about audiobooks, five focused on videos, and the remaining 28 were about books (see Table 2). Of these, four were removed/remained blocked, three were recatalogued, and 25 items were retained in the collection (the outcomes of six challenges were unclear).

Three items, all books, were removed from collections. One, "Arming America," was a nonfiction book which the head of reference (at Alpha Public Library) said contained "shoddy scholarship." After studying several concurring reviews, the book was removed from the collection. The other two were children's books removed from a school system for purported sexual content. At Lambda Public Library, a patron, on behalf of a student ministry organization, requested in 2006 that the website MySpace be unblocked. The patron asked, "How can we witness the best if they can't see our profile and we can't share the gospel?" However, this request for website access was denied by the library because "the website does not fall within the criteria of the Collection Development Policy" and "the website contains languages and images deemed inappropriate for minors" (communication from Lambda Public Library). This was the only challenge to originate from an organization; most challengers were acting on their own behalf.

Three items (two books and one audiobook) were recatalogued. The two books were relocated from the children's to the adult section, and the audiobook was moved from the young adult to the adult section. In Alpha Public Library, two books were re-cataloged from the Children's section to the Adult section. One book contained inappropriate sexual content and, from the parent's view, value promotion (namely, stating that homosexuality was an acceptable and valid choice). For this book, the head of the children's department wrote a review, stating "Even though I understand concerns over the viewpoint expressed in this book (and even to some extent agree with them) …" the book should not be withdrawn but relocated.

In a board meeting, the director shared this review, published reviews of the book, and read aloud certain passages, all of which led to the book being

Table 2. Summary of challenges received by responding institutions.

Institution	Format of challenged item	Challenger	Reason for complaint[a]	Outcome
Alpha Public Library	Book (nonfiction)	Library staff	"Shoddy scholarship"	Removed from collection
	Book (children's)	Patron (mother)	Unaware it dealt with homosexuality	Retained in collection
	Movie	Patron (mother)	Language	Retained in collection
	Book	Patron (father)	Inappropriate sexual content; value promotion (homosexuality)	Re-cataloged from Children's to Adult section
	Book (graphic novel)	Patron (parent)	Violence and sexual overtones	Re-cataloged from Children's to Adult section
	Book (graphic novel)	Patron	Extensive graphic sex scenes	Retained in collection
	Book (romance novel)	Patron	X-rated material; language	Retained in collection
Beta Public Library	Video	Patron (mother)	Language	Retained in collection
	Book	Patron	Language	Retained in collection
	Audiobook	Patron	Too graphic	Re-cataloged from Young Adult to Adult
	Audiobook	Patron	"Nasty language"	Retained in collection
	Book (graphic novel)	Patron	Sexual fantasy	Retained in collection
Gamma Public Library	DVD	Patron	"Offensive and copious use of profanity"; unrated DVD	Retained in collection
	Book (children's)		Weighty political topics; not actually about trains	Retained in collection
	Book	Patron	Offensive language	Retained in collection
	Book (children's)	Patron (mother)	Concern about topics of cross-dressing and sexual orientation	Retained in collection
Delta Public Library	DVD (series)	Patron	"Pornographic scenes"	Retained in collection
	Book	Patron	"Filthy language"	Unclear (director recommended retention)
	Books	Patron	Too sexual	Unclear (director recommended retention)
	DVD	Patron	Instigating small town shooting	Unclear (director recommended retention)
Epsilon Public Library[b]	Book (children's)	Patron (parent)	Inappropriate for young children	Retained in collection
Zeta Public Library	Book	Patron	Pornographic	Retained in collection
	Book (children's)	Patron	Nudity	Retained in collection
	Book	Patron	X-rated cover	Retained in collection

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued).

Institution	Format of challenged item	Challenger	Reason for complaint	Outcome
Eta Public Library	Book	Patron	Concern about vampire baby	Retained in collection
	Books	School served by bookmobile	Offensive books	Stopped serving school; books retained in collection
Theta Public Library	Books (manga)	Patron	"Naked children and females"	Retained in collection
	Audiobook	Patron	Graphic sexual depictions	Unclear (board recommended retention)
Iota Public Library	Audiobook	Patron	Too extreme	Unclear
	Book	Patron (parent)	Language	Retained in collection
Kappa Public School System	Books (series)	Parent	Sexual content	Removed from school library
Lambda Public Library	Book (children's)	Parent	Sexual content	Removed from school library
	Website	Organization (ministry)	Can't connect with students	Website remained blocked
Mu Public School System	Book	Parents	"Numerous curse words"	Retained in school library
Nu Public Library	Book	Patron	Contained crime scene photographs	Retained in collection
Xi Public Library	Book	Patron	Inaccuracy about band Lynyrd Skynyrd	Unclear (director recommended retention and additional purchase)

[a]Phrases in quotation marks are taken directly from the forms for reconsideration shared with us by the responding institutions.
[b]This library had one book challenged three separate times.

relocated to the Adult section (though the head of the children's department suggested it could be placed in the Young Adult section) (communication from Alpha Public Library). The second book that was recataloged was a graphic novel that was challenged for sexual and violent overtones.

The majority of challenged materials were retained in the collection (25 total items). One audiobook with "nasty language" was retained, as well as five movies/DVDs. Two challenges were initiated by patrons who self-identified as mothers; they argued that the content was inappropriate for their children, in both cases because of language. The remaining three video challenges were all idiosyncratic and unique to the individual titles. For example, "Angels in America," about the AIDS crisis, was challenged for "offensive and copious use of profanity" as well as being an unrated DVD. As the library director noted, however, films do not have to be subjected to the ratings system of the Motion Picture Association of America. (It might also be noted that the ALA recommends against labeling or rating movies, to avoid bias.) The DVD was retained in the collection. The other two DVDs were also retained in their respective collections, despite being one challenged for "pornographic scenes" and the other out of fear that it could instigate a shooting spree. The challengers of video/DVD titles seemed to react more viscerally to the graphic, visual nature of the content.

Most of the challenges centered on books. In Mu Public School System, a book was challenged for its offensive language (curse words), and the parent noted that the book had been banned from at least one school in Texas. After following procedure, the assistant superintendent noted that the book would be retained in the school library but the parent could work with the school librarians to "prevent your student from checking out certain books or certain genres of books" (communication from Mu Public School System). This is a common response to challenges in school libraries; a parent may indicate certain restrictions on reading material for their children, and these restrictions are then noted in the library's circulation software.

Six book challenges were explicitly about children's books. Generally, these books included content that the parents were not expecting. For example, the book "And Tango Makes Three," about two male penguins that adopt an egg and hatch a baby, was challenged several times because parents were unaware it was about homosexuality or they felt it was inappropriate for young children. In all reported cases, this book was retained in the collection. Another children's book dealt with cross-dressing and a third used the subject of trains to learn about endangered animals; in both cases, the parent's encountered unexpected content they viewed as inappropriate. These books were also retained.

The most common reasons for challenges to books were sexual content and offensive language. One patron felt a title contained such offensive language that he prepared a cover letter for his complaint and asked that

"only men" be allowed to read what was under the cover letter. Other complaints were more idiosyncratic: at Nu Public Library, a patron was upset that a book contained actual crime scene photographs, which were fairly graphic; at Eta Public Library, a patron expressed concern about a book in which a person gave birth to "a vampire baby." All of these books were retained in their respective collections. Another unusual complaint came from a school serviced by a public library bookmobile; school representatives wanted all "offensive books" removed from the bookmobile. When the director explained that was not possible (mainly because "offensive" was too subjective), the school cancelled the bookmobile service. A book at Xi Public Library was challenged because it contained purported inaccuracies about the rock band Lynyrd Skynyrd. Although the patron thought the band was portrayed as racist, the library director recommended the book be retained—and that additional material with different points of view be added.

As this summary shows, most challenges in Alabama institutions were unsuccessful: only four items were removed from collection; three were re-cataloged, and the disposition of six was unclear. Twenty-five out of 38 items (65.8%), despite being challenged, were retained in their respective collections as they had originally been cataloged. There are several possible interpretations of this finding (see Discussion section, which includes a brief analysis of possible self-censorship).

Analysis of institutional and demographic factors

In addition to compiling data about the challenges, we investigated the institutional demographical descriptors and the communities in which these challenges occurred to examine whether any factors might be related to the frequency of material challenges in public libraries and public schools in Alabama. For example, anecdotal reports indicate that rural areas or politically conservative communities may experience more challenges because the patrons in these areas may find more content controversial. Our data pool is obviously small and no statistical inferences can be derived from it. Nevertheless, examination of these demographic factors in relation to our data conveys important information about where challenges occurred in Alabama.

In terms of the institutions,[2] we examined the following components: the total income of the institution, the population of its legal service area (the community which the institution serves), and the circulation rate of all materials. This data was pulled from the 2013 Public Libraries in the United States survey conducted by IMLS. As Table 3 illustrates, the data present a mixed, unclear picture. We selected these factors because we suspected they may be related to the number of challenges received by institutions; anecdotal information, for example, suggests that public libraries with large patron bases may be more likely to receive challenges.

Table 3. Institutional factors for responding public libraries.

Institution	Number of MLS librarians	Total income	Service population	Total annual circulation
Alpha Public Library	1	874,943	89,300	179,656
Beta Public Library	7	2,173,019	25,183	516,808
Gamma Public Library	27	5,856,387	340,111	2,296,537
Delta Public Library	1	355,868	15,275	43,745
Epsilon Public Library	27	9,637,184	369,653	1,798,527
Zeta Public Library	11	4,955,526	232,032	514,695
Eta Public Library	0	195,858	100,719	38,647
Theta Public Library	2	525,433	80,536	175,491
Iota Public Library	0	248,615	40,640	139,054
Lambda Public Library	3	863,378	77,323	184,448
Nu Public Library	1	222,589	9,104	45,530
Xi Public Library	4	1,850,031	34,058	413,704

One supposition is that librarians with ALA-accredited Master's degrees may be better trained (compared to non-degree holding staff) in terms of intellectual freedom and institutional policies about challenges. Degree-holders may also have more expansive collection development orientations, collecting a broader spectrum of materials, including potentially controversial items; thus, one might expect some relationship between the number of degree-holding librarians and the number of reported challenges. Within our respondent pool, the number of librarians at each institution who hold an ALA-accredited Master's degree varies from zero to 27. Across the entire state, public libraries have between 0–58 MLS degree holders, so our data does not appear to contain outliers. Recall that Gamma Public Library had 5 challenges and Epsilon Public Library reported 3 challenges; although these institutions have many more degree-holding librarians, their reported challenges are in line with what other institutions reported. Similarly, those public libraries in our data set who have no or one degree-holding librarian reported diverse number of challenges, from seven to one. There is no discernible relationship here between the number of degree-holding librarians and the number of challenges an institution receives. In addition, there is no apparent relationship between degreed librarians and responses to challenges.

Another possible explanation for the number of reported challenges relies on the funding of the public library; perhaps those institutions with stronger funding are better positioned to purchase a broad array of materials, while those with little income are more likely to "play it safe" and avoid potentially controversial items. The total income—a combination of federal, state, and local funding—varies considerably between the institutions in our data set, ranging from just under $200,000 to nearly $10 million. There is no discernable pattern here; for example, better-funded libraries do not necessarily face more or fewer challenges compared to less-funded libraries. Across the state of Alabama, total income for all

public libraries (not just the respondents to this research) ranges from $2,357 to $15,727,369. Thus, our data again do not represent outliers, but rather are located across the spectrum of funding. From this data, there is no discernable relationship between an institution's income and the number or type of challenges received.

Similarly, there does not appear to be a relationship between the size of the patron population and the number of challenges received by the public libraries in our study. In Alabama, legal service area populations range between 357–369,653, while in our study, the range is from 9,104 to 369,653. Although several public libraries with large service populations are present in our study, many libraries with moderate or small patron populations are also present. Although one might reason that a large service population would include more diverse views, this does not necessarily translate into more challenges (see below for a discussion of different dimension of patron diversity).

Finally, we also examined the total annual circulation of these public libraries. Perhaps libraries that are used more heavily experience more challenges. However, we did not find such a relationship in our data. Across Alabama, total circulation ranges from zero to 2,296,537, while the libraries in our dataset reported total annual circulation of 38,647 to 2,296,537. The busyness of a library, in terms of circulation, does not appear to be related to the number of reported challenges.

In addition to looking at institutional factors as described in the preceding paragraphs, we also considered demographic factors of these institutions' communities. We examined the size, the poverty rate, the racial composition, the religious composition, the education levels, and the political leaning of the communities (see Table 4). Again, our motivation was suspicion that some of these factors may be related to the occurrence of or the number of challenges faced by public libraries and schools.

Perhaps large communities face more challenges. In large communities, there could be more points of view represented among patrons, which could translate into more conflicts with the content contained in public libraries or public schools. We used U.S. Census definitions of city, suburb, town, and rural to categorize the communities of our respondent institutions. One rural area, four towns, one suburb, and seven cities were represented. Some of the highest number of challenges were reported in cities: Alpha Public Library, Gamma Public Library, Epsilon Public Library, and Zeta Public Library all had at least three challenges and were located in cities. However, three communities that only had one challenge were also cities, and two communities with higher number of challenges (Beta Public Library and Delta Public Library) were not cities (they are a suburb and a town, respectively). Thus, it is difficult to discern any pattern from this data.

Table 4. Demographic factors of responding institutions' communities.

Institution	Locale	Poverty rate	% Non-white population	% Religious adherent	Education (% h.s. level)	Political leaning
Alpha Public Library	City	15.00	20.2	69.70	81.90	R (72%)
Beta Public Library	Suburb	19.50	47.0	83.90	87.70	D (53%)
Gamma Public Library	City	14.20	31.8	50.40	90.10	R (59%)
Delta Public Library	Town	25.40	52.0	55.00	74.60	D (51%)
Epsilon Public Library	City	19.60	39.8	61.30	84.90	R (54%)
Zeta Public Library	City	22.50	60.5	69.70	85.00	D (62%)
Eta Public Library	Town	13.00	14.3	53.20	89.00	R (77%)
Theta Public Library	Rural	17.20	5.3	78.10	81.50	R (84%)
Iota Public Library	Town	16.80	25.3	66.10	83.10	R (74%)
Kappa Public School System	Town	17.50	7.4	65.20	78.10	R (87%)
Lambda Public Library	City	20.50	25.1	71.40	80.10	R (66%)
Mu Public School System	City	25.20	28.7	40.60	87.50	R (53%)
Nu Public Library	Rural	24.90	45.5	79.20	80.10	R (54%)
Xi Public Library	City	19.50	47.0	83.90	87.70	D (53%)

In communities with higher levels of poverty, people may not have the resources to investigate what these public institutions carry. People's time and energy may be more likely to be spent on essential activities (in line with Maslow's hierarchy of needs). The poverty rate was pulled from the U.S. Census, which estimates poverty rates in each county. Although all of the institutions that reported only one challenge had higher levels of poverty (19.5% or higher), all of the institutions with two challenges had lower rates (17.5% or lower). No discernable pattern could be found in the data.

In communities that are racially diverse, public institutions may collect a broader array of materials, leading to more challenges; alternatively, racially diverse communities may have more issues of concern and sensitivity than homogenous communities, leading to more challenges. This data comes from the U.S. Census and is portrayed here as the percentage of non-white individuals in the county. We found diversity varied a great deal across the communities in our dataset, from 5.3 percent to 60.5 percent. However, we did not identify a relationship between racial diversity and the number of reported challenges. Some of the least diverse communities reported few

challenges (namely, Eta Public Library, Kappa Public School System, and Theta Public Library), but Alpha Public Library had low diversity and the greatest number of challenges.

Communities that are highly religious may raise more objections to content in public libraries and schools. The data for religious adherence shows how many individuals are reported as adhering to a major religion (not just Christianity). As shown in Table 4, religious adherence varies across these communities, from 40.6 percent to 83.9 percent, but the variance has no relationship to the variance in reported challenges. Several communities with high levels of religious adherence reported few challenges, but Beta Public Library had five challenges in a community with 83.9 percent religious adherence.

Finally, political leaning could be connected to the level of challenges. Perhaps communities with higher levels of conservativism are more likely to challenge materials that they find offensive. On the other hand, communities that are more liberal may have a greater diversity of materials, leading to more challenges. For this project, we used counties' voting records from the 2012 presidential election, as tracked and reported by Politico. Because we were asking about challenges from 2003–2013, the counties' voting records from 2012 are appropriate. Four of the institutions (Beta Public Library, Delta Public Library, Zeta Public Library, and Xi Public Library) from our project were located in counties that voted Democratic in 2012; they received between one to five challenges. The remaining ten institutions were in Republican-majority counties and reported one to seven challenges. Again, no discernable pattern can be identified. Other Democratic-leaning counties in Alabama reported no challenges, as did many Republican-leaning counties.

Discussion

This research has illuminated the nature of challenges in public libraries and public schools across Alabama, though it has also left some questions unanswered and sparked some additional ones. For example, one prominent question must be about the low number of reported challenges. Whether using the data collected for this project (16 institutions reported challenges) or the data from OIF (in which 43 institutions reported challenges), the proportion remains quite small: either 4.6 percent or 12.3 percent of institutions reported challenges. If there were no institutions that appeared in both datasets, that would mean that 59 public libraries and public schools reported challenges from 2003–2013 (just 16.8% of all Alabama institutions). This seems like an incredibly low number, but there are a variety of possible explanations.

First, it is possible, even likely, that many challenges go unreported. Recall that only 169 institutions (48.1%) provided substantive responses to our FOI requests. It seems likely that several, perhaps many, of the non-responsive institutions also

had challenges—but this number is unknown. The data collected by OIF (described above) consists of voluntary self-reporting; institutions must take action to fill out a form or place a phone call to report challenges. Thus, it is likely that the OIF data reflects underreporting as well. In fact, the OIF suggests that "up to 85 percent of book challenges receive no media attention and remain unreported" (Challenges para. 8). If the OIF claim is accurate, then Alabama institutions may have received 347 challenges during this time period. However, we do not have the data to verify this. It is also possible that these institutions underreported challenges due to self-interest.

Second, there may be some confusion about what is considered a "challenge." Typically, a challenge is considered a formal written complaint—the beginning of a formal process of review and response.[3] However, the data collected for this project includes some oral complaints; patrons expressed concern but did not file formal paperwork. We accepted institutions' reports at face value, considering these oral reports to be "challenges" if the institutions did. This does show that there is likely some confusion at the institutional level about what a challenge is. Perhaps this is exacerbated when institutions do not have formal challenge policies in place. It is also interesting that some libraries, apparently, do not keep more detailed records concerning challenges.

Third, it is possible, even likely, that many institutions have collections that reflect their patrons' beliefs and values. In other words, they collect the materials that patrons want, and thus patrons have little reason to challenge anything. Serving the community is essential to the success of a public library or school system, and it is important to have materials that the library patrons want. The data collected for this project suggest that many Alabama institutions are doing a good job of serving their communities in this regard, though there remains an extensive debate in the literature considering the extent to which a collection should be guided by patron interest (see, e.g., Usherwood 2007). In other words, if the collections reflected beliefs and values very different from the patrons' beliefs and values, there would likely be more challenges.

Fourth, this data may reflect a cautious, even timid approach to collection development in Alabama institutions. Again, we think this is likely true in many public libraries and schools. Jo Godwin famously said, "A truly great library contains something in it to offend everyone." If this is true, then we must question the collection development practices in which only 4.6 percent (or 12.3%) of institutions receive challenges. While people may be offended by something in the collection without filing a challenge, if collections did contain controversial, challenging material, it seems reasonable to expect a higher number of challenges. Simply put, Alabama librarians and other officials may be avoiding contentious or potentially controversial items. If they are not collecting potentially controversial items, then the collections may become more homogenous and bland, ultimately doing a disservice to

their communities. The LIS literature discusses the importance of having a diverse, wide-ranging collection, including potentially controversial items: these help people experience, understand, and respect different points of view, expose patrons to new ideas and perspectives, and can help create a more tolerant society (Oltmann, forthcoming).

In addition to considering the quantity and quality of challenges, we also examined some relevant institutional and demographic factors. We investigated whether there was a relationship between receiving challenges and factors such as the total income of the institution, the population of its legal service area (the community which the institution serves), and the circulation rate of all materials. We anticipated finding some relationships, as described above, but with the limited data set, we did not identify any patterns. The same holds true for the institutions' communities: we examined several demographic characteristics, including the size, the poverty rate, the racial composition, the religious composition, the education levels, and the political leaning of the communities. However, we did not find any clear relationship between these demographic factors and institutions that reported challenges.

The lack of clear findings for this portion of the project has a few different explanations. First, it is possible that there is no relationship between any of these elements and challenge to content in public libraries and public schools, despite anecdotal evidence and supposition to the contrary. If there are no relationships between challenges and the factors that we examined, then our study is the first to document such a lack. This, of course, then raises the following questions: are other factors relevant? Are other aspects of institutions correlated with the number of challenges an institution reports? Or are other demographic factors of the institutions' communities related to challenges? If so, what might these other factors be? Thus, an acknowledged weakness of this research is its small and incomplete dataset.

Second, it seems equally possible that some relationships do exist, but our dataset was not robust enough to capture them. With only fourteen institutions reporting challenges, we had relatively little data to analyze. For example, the poverty rates in these communities ranged from 13.0 percent to 25.4 percent, a relatively small amount of variance. It is possible that, if we were to examine communities with greater variance in the poverty level, we might find a relationship with the number of reported challenges. Many of the factors we examined here seem to make intuitive sense or have been supported anecdotally by librarians working in the field. Intuitively, one might think that conservative communities (measured by recent voting habits) would be more likely to object to diversity in children's and youth literature. Our data do suggest that many complaints were about inappropriate language and sexuality (see Table 2). Again, one might think that such complaints would likely be correlated

to some of the factors we examined in this project. Our data, however, simply do not show such relationships.

We believe this is due to the sparse nature of the data—incomplete reporting of challenges from a single state. As we continue this project, collecting more data from more states, we anticipate that some relationships will become evident. In some ways, our research begins to answer Dresang's (2006) call for more systematic, rigorous research into intellectual freedom and how institutions handle challenges to content. We believe this is one of the first thorough examinations of multiple challenges across multiple institutions. However, our project only begins to address Dresang's call: much more research is needed into intellectual freedom and censorship. In the future, we plan to address some of the questions raised by this research. For example, with more data from more states, we may be able to identify some correlations between demographic or geographic factors and the occurrence of (or outcome of) challenges.

The implications for the profession are somewhat unclear. On one hand, the finding that nearly two-thirds of challenges ended with the item being retained suggests that librarians are defending intellectual freedom and are stalwart in presenting diverse materials and points of view in their institutions. On the other hand, the small number of challenges may suggest that librarians are avoiding collecting material that may be potentially controversial. This runs counter to guidance from the ALA as well as the ethos of the profession.

Conclusion

This project examined reported challenges to materials in public libraries and public schools in the state of Alabama. Using FOI as an information-gathering tool, we requested that every public library and public school system in the state report information about challenges. We received data from 169 total institutions, 14 of which reported challenges. Analyzing these challenges in more detail revealed that most objections were about inappropriate language and sexual content. Most challenges were unsuccessful; approximately two-thirds of challenged materials were retained in the collection after consideration from the director and/or the board. Next, we considered whether reported challenges were related to various institutional and demographic factors. Our dataset is too small to reveal such relationships, which further argues the need for additional research in this area. In subsequent research, we plan to increase the scope of this project, seeking reports of challenges from several states.

Notes

1. We acknowledge that giving the institutions pseudonyms may seem odd, since these records are public information and were obtained through public records requests.

However, we are concerned that some institutions may be judged for their actions (such as withdrawing an item after a challenge). Further, fear of such a response may make institutions in future work hesitant to respond to such public records requests. Thus, we want to assure institutions (both those in this project and in future projects) that they will not be "named and shamed."

2. The following paragraphs, describing characteristics of the institutions, focuses solely on public libraries. Comparable information about public school libraries is not available.

3. We note that many libraries indicate they receive verbal complaints or informal challenges far more frequently than formal, written challenges. Thus, focusing only on formal challenges does limit our dataset. Because we limited our data to formal challenges, which few libraries reported, this means we remain less-informed about how libraries deploy their policies. However, few (if any) libraries keep track of informal complaints in addition to formal challenges and few have formal policies written to address informal complaints. Thus, we feel that focusing on formal complaints was appropriate.

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