"1st Amendment Rights, BABY!": Banned Books Week on a College Campus

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Abstract

Since 2021, the American Library Association has reported a marked increase in the number of book challenges in the United States. Public and school libraries, where most of these attempts at censorship occur, frequently celebrate Banned Books Week each fall, to raise awareness about the ongoing threat to intellectual freedom. College and university libraries face fewer book challenges and might not celebrate Banned Books Week; however, given the rise in number and visibility of conversations surrounding book banning, hosting events on the week's theme offers academic libraries a way to engage their students thoughtfully in civic conversations. This practical article details the planning, promotion, and assessment process one university library in Alabama undertook as it responded to recent local issues by implementing programming during Banned Books Week.

Keywords: Banned Books Week, censorship, academic libraries, assessment, programming, outreach, engagement

Introduction

Banned Books Week, a week hosted by the American Library Association (ALA) advocating for the freedom to read and drawing attention to ongoing attempts at censorship, is most commonly celebrated by public and school libraries; however, it can also provide a valuable outreach opportunity for academic libraries to engage students in meaningful local debates surrounding intellectual freedom. In Fall 2023, against a backdrop of rising book

challenges and bans, Auburn University Libraries (AUL) decided to host its first celebration of Banned Books Week in several years. By embracing a collaborative approach to planning, and centering assessment throughout the development process, librarians at AUL worked toward their goals of challenging students to reflect on local cultural issues and of measuring the long-term impact that such programming can have.

Background

Auburn University is a large public, R1, land-grant university with a full-time enrollment of approximately 27,500 students located in Auburn, Alabama. The student body has strong in- state representation as well as a significant number of out-of-state and international students. Auburn University Libraries has a central location in Ralph Brown Draughon (RBD) Library as well as two satellite locations in the College of Art, Design, and Construction and the Auburn University College of Veterinary Medicine.

In 1982, ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF), the American Booksellers Association, and the National Association of College Stores launched the first Banned Books Week Celebration in the United States. The celebration spoke back to contemporary increases in book challenges and organized protests, as well as the 1982 Supreme Court case *Board of Education v. Pico*, which ultimately ruled that the school boards' discretion regarding the management of school affairs must be exercised in a way that did not infringe upon the First Amendment Rights of students. In other words, local school boards may not remove books from school library shelves simply because they dislike the ideas contained within those books (*Board of Education v. Pico*, 1982).

In 2023, the ALA OIF reported the highest number of unique titles challenged in the United States since ALA started compiling data—4,240. The data show that book challenges started rising in 2021 when the OIF reported 1,858 unique titles challenged—up from the trend of 100–400 titles per year over the previous 20 years. Titles representing the voices and lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC individuals made up 47 percent of those targeted in censorship attempts (*American Library Association Reports Record Number of Unique Book Titles Challenged in 2023*, 2024).

Events on the local level at Auburn Public Library first drew one AUL librarian's attention to book challenges in Alabama. The library reviewed *This Book is Gay* at the request of a patron in late 2022. The community member who made that request attended the January meeting of the Auburn Public Library Advisory Board, where she spoke for approximately 45 minutes on her "personal opinions regarding works in the library's collection that feature and/or relate to members of the LGBTQ+ community" (Auburn Public Library Advisory Board, 2023, p. 1). That community member continues to attend library board and Auburn City Council meetings, where she expresses her negative views regarding the LGBTQ+ community and their representation in the collections of Auburn Public Library. A memo regarding the library's decision to retain the book but reclassify it as Adult Nonfiction was shared in the materials packet distributed before the board meeting.

The idea for the AUL to host Banned Books Week programming arose in the context of these local issues. Book challenges and pressures for censorship affect public libraries at a higher rate than college and university libraries, which serve a mostly adult population and can claim the protection of academic freedom (American Library Association, 2023). However, the librarians at RBD recognized the value of encouraging college students to look

outside of their campus bubble and participate in the cultural conversations of their broader communities. Additionally, they recognized their ability to act as advocates against censorship in more active ways than public and school librarians may feel safe to do.

Over after-work coffee in Summer 2023, as AUL's Digital Scholarship Librarian shared news of the recent library board meetings, two instruction librarians realized the opportunity to expand information literacy education beyond the classroom. By asking students to reflect on the information cycle and debates about intellectual freedom within their own local community, librarians could bring home to them the value of unrestricted access to information on both a personal and societal level. Ideally, the week would also encourage students to take action on the issue of censorship, helping them transition from being not only observers of cultural issues, but also active participants entering adulthood as educated, engaged citizens.

Baked-In Assessment: Planning Activities

With this purpose in mind, the newly formed Banned Books Week team at AUL began brainstorming and planning events. As they strategized, the team intentionally kept assessment at the forefront of their planning. With each activity they explored, the team asked themselves how they would determine its impact once the week was over and how they would use that data when planning future iterations of the week. Especially since this event had not been held at AUL since the mid-2000s due to staffing changes, they wanted to be able to gather metrics that would communicate the week's value to leadership and stakeholders in order to establish an annual celebration of Banned Books Week.

The planning team centered assessment throughout the planning process because they felt it important to address the scarcity of research available on assessing the long-term impact of Banned Books Week programming at academic libraries. Public and school libraries have understandably produced valuable literature on planning, promoting, and evaluating Banned Books Week events (Anderson et al., 2009; Mroczek, 2023; Petrilli, 2009). Recently, academic libraries have also written about their experiences hosting activities for the week from a practical perspective (Hooper & Wilson, 2021; Palmer & Browning, 2021). There is a wealth of research about the value of gathering and analyzing data on outreach programming in academic libraries in a more general sense (Dobbs, 2017; Villamor & Shotick, 2022). However, there seems to be a gap when it comes to assessing these events in a college and university context, especially in the context of the post-2021 surge in book challenges. By adopting an intentional approach to assessment, the team would be able to better understand and communicate the value of Banned Books Week programming in an academic library, especially given the week's high-impact potential amid recent local issues.

Activities

The planning team wanted to offer a wide range of activities that would offer students opportunities with varying levels of interaction for engaging in the week-long celebration. To that end, they prepared static physical and digital displays, a low-tech and accessible interactive display, a public reading event, materials to give away from multiple service desks in RBD, and a social media campaign.

Physical book displays in which librarians select books according to a theme and place them in an exhibit area, often alongside contextual text and art, have long been a mainstay of

library engagement. For Banned Books Week 2023 at AUL, titles were selected from the list historically censored books in *Banned Books: Defending Our Freedom to Read* by Robert Doyle (2017) based on whether they were extant in the collection and the librarian's prediction on whether they would feel familiar, relevant, and/or interesting to the university community. Many titles pulled from RBD's shelves were rebound in plain, single-color library binding, reducing their visual appeal and familiarity. To counter this and try to draw interest to the exhibit, the librarian created contextual posters that contained familiar cover photos, quotes from authors like Judy Blume, and information related to the censorship of select titles. Books were generally grouped according to typical genres, excluding ghost stories and tales of witchcraft and wizardry, which were placed together in a nod to the approaching Halloween holiday. The authors planned to assess the effectiveness of the display based on circulation statistics of the displayed books.

Figure 1. *The physical display of banned and challenged books from the shelves of RBD.*

The Digital Scholarship Librarian also created a display on AUL's Digital Wall in the Innovation and Research Commons (I&RC). Rather than showing titles, this display focused on book ban data compiled and released by ALA OIF. The librarian created visualizations derived from those released by ALA OIF which were of appropriate resolution for the wall of television screens on which they were displayed. These visualizations aesthetically coordinated with the contextual posters on the nearby physical book display to visually link the two exhibits. With neither associated circulation statistics nor a practical way to record library users stopping to view the display, the librarian created QR codes which users could scan to find more information about the content of the display. By using the university's internally designed URL shortening server (aub.ie), traffic through the QR codes could be counted. She hoped that people who stopped to view the display might scan one or both codes to find more information, allowing the team to assess the impact of the Digital Wall display.

RBD Library houses the university's Special Collections and Archives (SC&A), which contain rare books and volumes of historic value. For Banned Books Week, SC&A's Instruction and Research Librarian worked with a team to pull several historically challenged classic books, including titles such as *In Cold Blood*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Sound and the Fury*, and *Sula*. Books were labeled with title and publication information and displayed in two prominent cases in the public reading area of the archives. Along with the individual book labels, the display also included a link to ALA's lists of challenged classic books in case visitors wanted to learn more.

The planning team also wanted a display that would allow students to engage with the week's theme in a hands-on manner. Passive programming, a library outreach strategy allowing visitors to interact with activities on a drop-by basis, can be an effective method for drawing patrons in to library events on their own terms and in their own time. This strategy is especially

relevant when undergraduate students, who have erratic schedules and many demands on their time, are the primary audience of an event (Freudenberger, 2019; Jensen & Parker, 2015). To facilitate this type of audience involvement, the team designed an interactive display that could be placed in a high-traffic area. They placed it on a wall next to RBD's Help Desk, in a main thoroughfare between classrooms, group study space, and the in-house Panera. They kept the design simple: a large 36 x 48 in blank poster, with a question at the top: "Why Does the Freedom to Read Matter to You?" and "Grab a post-it note and share your answer!" in smaller font below. Beside the poster, a brief text explained the origin and theme of the week and gave a QR code linking to further information, serving the dual purpose of tracking engagement metrics. Next to the poster sat a stack of Post-it notes and markers patrons could use to publicly respond to the prompt.

As planning for the week unfolded, the team explored the possibility of creating a public reading event. By inviting participants to read from banned or challenged books, this event would bring awareness to issues of censorship, access to information, and the libraries' dedication to supporting intellectual freedom. The public reading event would be similar in format to ALA's suggested "banned read-out" found in descriptions and promotional ideas for libraries' Banned Books events. A "read-out" invites anyone to read aloud a banned or challenged book (ALA, 2021). AUL's read-aloud event would invite participants to read a 5–10-minute passage from their favorite banned or challenged book. Interested readers could sign up for 5-minute time slots over a two-hour period via a QR code embedded in the event flyer.

Libraries often host Banned Books Week reading events with academic units as co-sponsors (Heflin, 2018). Promoted as read-ins, marathon reads, or read-aloud, these events support foundational literacy for the library's community and encourage engagement and

enrichment in the public sphere (Eshbach, 2020). During the initial planning stages of the reading event, the team explored the possibility of collaborating with academic units, such as University Writing and the English Department; however, the event's timing coincided with the midterm point in Auburn's semester, preventing peer units from committing to participation due to time constraints. Nonetheless, they were happy to share promotional materials with their faculty and students and directed any inquiries about the event to the planning team. Planners held the public reading in the Mell Classroom Building, which is connected to the entrance of RBD Library. The open area within the building offers a variety of seating options and is highly visible to anyone passing by. The books displayed as options for reading were commonly challenged or banned titles, including *The Story of Ferdinand, In the Night Kitchen, Flowers for Algernon, Blankets, The Handmaid's Tale, Animal Farm, Annie on My Mind, Lord of the Rings,* and *The Hunger Games.*

As a physical give-away item to pass out during the public reading, library administration authorized the purchase of a digital bookmark file from ALA featuring the top 10 most frequently challenged books of 2022, the most recent year available at that time (Office of Intellectual Freedom, n.d.). These bookmarks drew attention to ongoing challenges to popular books, such as *Gender Queer*, *This Book is Gay*, *The Bluest Eye*, and others. The file included a design only for the front side of the bookmarks, so on the reverse, the planning team designed an infographic suggesting steps to combat book censorship. Recommendations included registering to vote, writing representatives, getting a library card, reading banned books, reporting censorship, staying informed, and sharing about Banned Books Week on social media. The team hoped to turn patrons' attention to ways they could make a lasting impact beyond the week itself. The bookmarks also included a QR code linking to ALA's website with more information about the

week, through which the team also measured interactions (American Library Association, n.d.). Stacks of bookmarks were provided to the library's two circulation desks, the research Help Desk, and the service desk at the I&RC.

Paired with the bookmarks' content, AUL shared about commonly challenged books via its social media channels. The team worked with the libraries' communication director and his student assistant to plan content ahead of time. They used Instagram posts and stories to highlight the libraries' Banned Books Week activities. On Monday, the libraries shared a post introducing Banned Books Week and advertising the upcoming activities. Tuesday, a post promoted the public reading event while stories highlighted the physical display in SC&A and shared the 3 books tied at #10 on the list of most-challenged titles of 2022. On Wednesday, Instagram stories featured titles #7-9, and Thursday's stories featured books #4-6. Finally, on Friday, stories showed the top three most-challenged books of 2022 and suggestions for ways to get involved after the official week ended. The libraries shared all Instagram posts and stories to their Facebook page, and a post on LinkedIn promoted the week's activities the day of the public reading.

Promoting Programming

The social media campaign discussed above served a dual purpose, not only acting as an engagement methodology itself, but also driving attention toward the in-person displays and events. Although AUL has had success reaching graduate students through special programming, recent undergraduate participation has been more varied. Advertising events through social media formed a key part of the marketing strategy in order to reach undergraduate students where they are. Instagram, as the most-used social media platform by people aged 18-24 other than YouTube, was a natural fit for this type of promotion (Gottfried, 2024). Librarians

on the planning team also re-shared posts through their own accounts throughout the week.
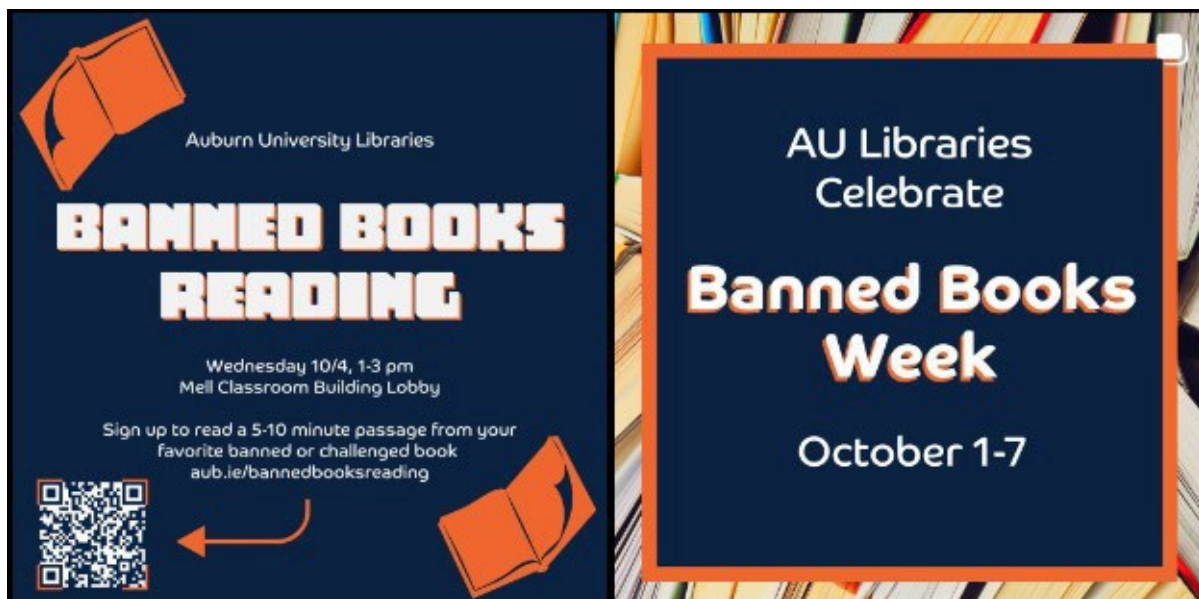

Figure 2. *Screenshots of Two Posts Made on the Auburn University Libraries' Instagram Page during Banned Books Week.*

The team also targeted campus-specific advertisement channels. The week before Banned Books Week, the libraries shared a brief news item through the weekly online campus news release, including a description of the week's purpose, a list of displays, a notice about the public reading, and contact information (*Banned Books Week at AU Libraries*, 2023). Knowing that many students may not read general campus email, the team also advertised through Auburn's student involvement platform, AU Involve, through which campus organizations and student life groups share upcoming events targeted toward undergraduate engagement (*Banned Book Week*, 2023). Finally, in RBD, A-frame signs and digital signage displayed notices about both the week's general celebration and specifically the public reading throughout the building. The team also marketed and promoted the public reading to specific student engagement units and reached out directly to instructors of first-year English Composition courses as well as

individuals who were heavily involved in student support initiatives.

Internal advertisement also served a role in getting the word out about Banned Books Week events. By informing library employees about the celebration's revival at AUL, they could notify their campus connections to further amplify the news. The Friday before Banned Books Week, the team submitted a notice to "News You Can Use," the libraries' weekly internal email, encouraging employees to check out the upcoming displays and to participate in the public reading if their schedules allowed. Librarians also received a special notice asking them to share a pre-scripted text and flyer with their liaison departments. With the goal of reaching a wide campus audience, the planners utilized multiple internal and external communication channels, hoping to reach students, faculty, and staff however they typically discover campus events.

Assessing Banned Books Week Programming

The team took a straightforward and well-established approach in assessing the physical book display—comparing circulation statistics from periods before, during, and after the display. The librarians showed the Banned Books Week Display for all of Q4 2023 and part of Q1 2024. While circulation among Auburn University users decreased during the pandemic, ILL Delivery increased, preventing as drastic a dip in circulation counts as might be expected throughout the period of nationwide Covid-19 restrictions. As seen in Table 1, circulations during the display (18) account for approximately 42.9% of all circulations for these books in the last 3 years. Titles included in the Banned Books Week Display circulate between 0–5 times each quarter in which they are not displayed and 6–12 times during the quarters in which they are. Library users checked the books out more frequently during the time in which they were exhibited, indicating success for the physical book display.

Table 1. *Historic Circulation Counts for Books Displayed During Banned Books Week 2023*

Year	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Total
2021	2	0	5	4	11
2022	4	0	3	1	8
2023	2	0	3	12	17
2024	6				6

Note: As of the time of submission of this article, Q1 2024 is the most recent circulation data available.

The digital display posed a greater assessment challenge because the team found no way to count views. They hoped people might scan the QR codes to find more information, but collected statistics show no usage. Installing a camera to count people who enter the exhibit space could solve this problem, but that solution would only create a new issue—surveilling an area where people come to read and learn about controversial topics. Although assessment of this activity remains complicated, the planners will continue including displays on the Digital Wall. With its prime location facing building entry doors and a frequently used central atrium staircase, the display may also serve as a sort of billboard to catch people's attention and let them know that events are happening around the library.

On the other hand, planners could more easily measure events where patrons physically engaged with the week's activities. For example, although the QR code beside the interactive display only received 1 hit, the display received 46 responses via Post-it notes to the question "Why Does the Freedom to Read Matter to You?" Responses showed serious reflection from students, including answers such as "Reading allows you the ability to do your own research to form opinions on today's hot topics," "My ancestors couldn't," and "Reading defies ignorance

and teaches empathy by helping us to learn about problems besides our own. Censorship is

control." In some replies, students broadened the conversation on censorship beyond books to

include internet fanfiction sites like Archive of Our Own (AO3). One cluster of notes showed

students responding to each other's comments, having a mini conversation within the display.

Beyond the number of responses, the display's high visibility also generated attention, with

people stopping to read or discuss the display with friends. Measuring this type of foot traffic is

challenging, and conversations overheard in passing are anecdotal. By having an interactive

element, however, the team was able to capture a small portion of visitors' reactions—and those

reactions show many visitors engaging on a deep level with the week's theme.
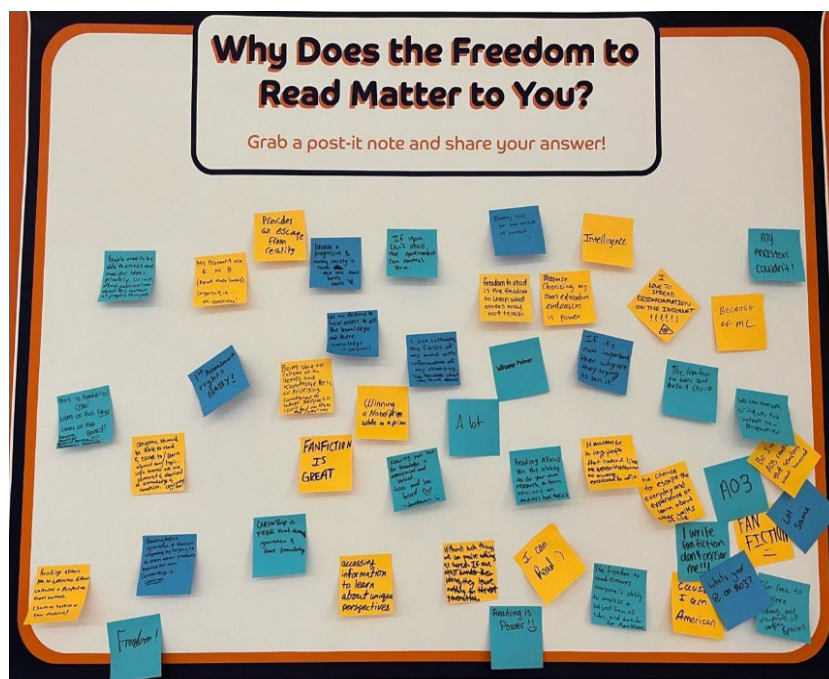

Figure 3. *Interactive Display Captioned "Why Does the Freedom to Read Matter to You? Grab a post-it note and share your answer!"*

At the public reading, four librarians chose to read. Three students read as well, two of

whom had pre-registered and one who spontaneously joined as the event began. While they

provided many titles to choose from for the reading, the planners also encouraged participants to bring their own book. One reader brought a copy of the book *Johnny the Walrus,* while others read from titles such as "Can the Monster Speak?" and *This Book is Gay.* When asked how they learned of the reading, all readers replied that a professor shared the details during class. The QR code embedded in the flyer saw 59 hits by the day of the event, and the direct link to the sign-up sheet had been emailed and clicked 35 times. The social media posts containing the sign-up link generated 5 clicks.

Despite a modest turnout, the event piqued the curiosity of nearby students, with some passersby expressing regret that they could not stay due to a conflicting class. Planners still considered the event a success overall. Choosing a prominent location that didn't interfere with students' daily activities proved to be an effective way of generating interest.
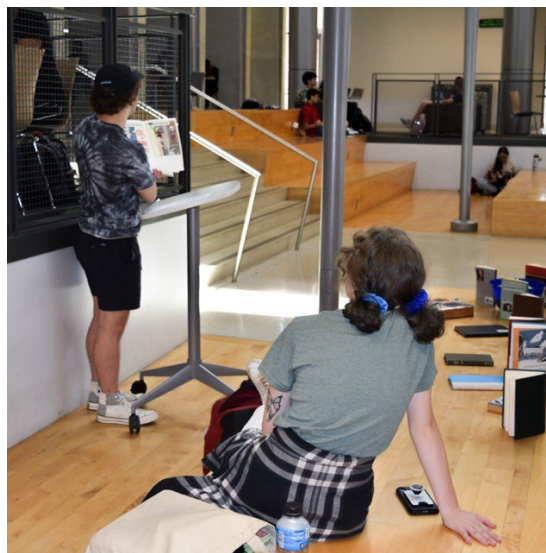

Figure 4. *Student Reading from a Book at the Banned Books Reading*

The social media campaign held during Banned Books Week generated a high level of

engagement, assessed primarily through post views and interactions. The libraries' posts on Instagram were some of the heaviest hitters of the week: the post advertising the week's events reached 1450 unique accounts, with 535 of those not already following the libraries, and the post promoting the public reading reached 547 accounts. The libraries' Instagram stories received anywhere between 149 and 273 views apiece. Facebook saw lower engagement: the main advertisement post received 17 likes and 7 shares, the public reading post received 7 likes, and the SC&A display post received 16 likes and 1 share. LinkedIn proved to be an active venue for social media engagement. The two posts about Banned Books Week featuring images of the interactive display and the public reading generated 226 unique impressions and 49 interactions combined (including clicks, reactions, and reposts), which are more interactions than any other post within a six-month period. The number of interactions on Instagram and Facebook is closer to the libraries' typical engagement rate. Overall, the team would consider the social media campaign successful given its reach and return on a low time investment.

Incidental Impact

In addition to the gathered quantitative assessment data, a couple of additional outcomes indicate campus-wide effects of the program. First, during the lead-up to Banned Books Week, the planning team reached out to the student-led campus newspaper, *The Auburn Plainsman*, to advertise the event, hoping the newspaper would include a notice that the events were happening. Instead, *The Plainsman* sent its Assistant Culture Editor to interview two members of the planning team, take a tour of the exhibits, and publish a full article and photos of the interactive exhibit (Bosart, 2023). That interview allowed the team to speak about the broader cultural context of Banned Books Week and the value of celebrating it at an academic library. Assessing

the impact of this interview is difficult without having data on the specific article's views; however, *The Plainsman* claims to have an average total monthly pageview of over 200,000 (*Advertising*, 2024). In that way, AUL leveraged this event to position itself as a key participant in both campus and community life.

As a result of the publicity that the week generated around the libraries, students on campus began expressing interest in the libraries' role in promoting intellectual freedom. Later in the fall semester, two separate undergraduate students reached out to the planning team asking to interview a librarian about the libraries' recent Banned Books Week celebration and about the general issue of book censorship. Both requests came from students in journalism classes who needed to interview experts for written assignments and portfolios. The students did not indicate how they found out about the libraries' activities—whether through *The Plainsman,* social media, or other advertisement at the time of the event—but the fact that they viewed the AUL team as experts on this topic indicates that the week's events made a lasting impression.

As a side benefit, planning such a wide array of events and programming in different formats gave nearly every department in the libraries an opportunity to participate in student engagement. Two members of the planning team were from the Research and Instruction Services (RIS) department, and RIS librarians also helped in advertising the week to their liaison departments. The third member came from the Research Support department, and other staff in that department helped with printing bookmarks and developing the Digital Wall display, housed in the I&RC. Circulation staff assisted by assigning temporary locations to the physical book display and Collections, Discovery, and Resource Sharing staff pulled usage statistics. A librarian from SC&A oversaw the book display in their space. Lastly, the administrative office helped with procuring the bookmark file, running social media, and providing support and

approval for the event. The Banned Books Week team found it to be a rewarding experience to collaborate across teams, working with departments outside their usual area. Although this was not the primary purpose of AUL's programming, it is an element they intend to replicate in future events.

Conclusion

Despite the intricacies of assessing a multi-part, week-long event such as Banned Books Week programming, the planning team considers the week to have been a success, which they hope to replicate and improve in coming years. Some assessment methods failed to generate meaningful data, but others, such as social media statistics and the visibility of student responses to the interactive display, did produce useful metrics for communicating the event's value to stakeholders. Moreover, beyond the quantitative assessment of unique interactions with library events, the high-level interest the event generated from the broader campus community serves asclear evidence of its reach. Increasing library visibility in the campus newspaper to the level that students across campus reached out to the project team for comment on the issue of censorship and intellectual freedom proves impact in itself. Moreover, for future iterations of Banned Books Week programming, AUL now has historical data it can use for comparison. Some adjustments to promotion, assessment methods, and the events themselves may take place, but by rigorously implementing assessment from the start, those adjustments can now be data-driven. The team will be able to maximize the week's reach and impact, continuing to engage students in civic conversations and encourage them to be active participants in their local communities.

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