

## Survey Applies Public Collection Development Librarians' Support for Intellectual Freedom to Collection Process

Oltmann, S. M. (2019). Important factors in Midwestern public librarians' views on intellectual freedom and collection development: Part 2. *The Library Quarterly*, 89(2), 156-172. <https://doi.org/10.1086/702203>

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*Evidence Summary*

**Survey Applies Public Collection Development Librarians' Support for Intellectual Freedom to Collection Process**

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**Abstract**

**Objective** – To explore how librarian attitudes regarding intellectual freedom and demographic factors influence collection development decisions.

**Design** – Online survey.

**Setting** – Public libraries in the Midwestern United States.

**Subjects** – 645 collection development library professionals employed in public libraries.

**Methods** – An electronic survey was distributed to 3,018 public library directors in nine Midwestern states and completed by the library professional primarily responsible for collection development (Oltmann, 2019, p. 6). The survey had a 21.37% response rate. The survey focused on intellectual freedom in the management of collections and probed the participants for their experiences and influences in making collection development decisions. The survey also asked participants to make hypothetical purchasing and holdings decisions for library materials based on a short description of the material.

**Main Results** – Participants indicated that they used a variety of different tools for the selection of materials including patron requests. Of the participants, 45.7% indicated that their library had a policy, practice, or metric to assess the balance of their collections, while 54.3% indicated that their libraries did not have policy or method in place for ensuring that their collection was balanced. Of the respondents, 73.4% felt that local community values should be considered in collection development decision, but 62.3% said that this should not be the most important factor in decisions. Overall, the political leaning of the community did not have an impact on participants' alignment with the ALA's stances on intellectual freedom. Most respondents (73.4%) felt that government library funding bodies should have an influence over collection development decisions. Some respondents indicated they felt internal pressure from other library staff or the library board to purchase particular materials (28.1%) or relocate materials (14.1%). Respondents also indicated that they felt external pressure from their communities to purchase (32%) or restrict or withdraw (19.1%) materials. In the hypothetical purchasing scenario, most librarians indicated that they would purchase the majority of items. Some participants (39.8%) felt tension between their personal and professional views on intellectual freedom.

**Conclusion** – The first part of this article found that holding an MLS degree had a significant impact on participants' stance on intellectual freedom and alignment with the American Library Association (ALA) principles. This part indicated that they also felt greater pressure to withdraw, acquire, and manage particular materials in their collections and felt more tension between their personal and professional stances on intellectual freedom. Age, gender, duration of work, and community political affiliations significantly impacted only some of the participants' responses. Overall, there was general support for intellectual freedom and alignment with the ALA principles; however, 40% of respondents indicated tension between their

personal and professional beliefs about intellectual freedom.

### Commentary

This article is the second part in a pair of articles focusing on the same data. An evidence summary for the first part was published in *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice* (Costello, 2019). In the first part, Oltmann (2019) examined the perspectives of librarians on intellectual freedom while the second part focuses on the collection development implications of those views. This article demonstrates that the strong support for principles of intellectual freedom participants demonstrated in the first part of the article bears out in their hypothetical collection development actions.

The hypothetical purchasing scenarios featured in the survey aligned with the stated views of the participants, but some of the comments seemed to indicate that the participants wanted more information about materials to be able to make their collection development decisions. The application portion of this survey may have worked better qualitatively. Participants largely approved of theoretical books that had the potential to attract challenges, but it may have been more informative to hear about particular real purchases or selections that had been challenged and the actual actions participants took to negotiate those challenges. Because the survey addressed hypothetical rather than real collection development choices and the librarians were not able to use the strategies they would ordinarily use to address intellectual freedom concerns, the responses may not be representative.

The author found that most participants did not have a specific plan to ensure balanced collection development and comments from respondents in this area indicated that some librarians relied on the contributions of patrons to fully develop parts of their collections. Balance-finding is a particularly important strategy in these new acquisitions strategies since patron requests can overdevelop areas of interest (Tyler, Hitt,

Nterful, & Mettling, 2019; Blume, 2019). Without a structured development plan in place, building collections from patron interests may stray from the guidelines promoted by the ALA.

This article reconfirms the commitment of public collection development librarians to the intellectual freedom standards of the ALA. Though librarians support these standards in their ideas and actions surrounding collection development, a strong minority felt tension between their professional and personal feelings on intellectual freedom. In the limitations section of the article, the author draws attention to the fact that terms were not defined in the survey, so interpretations of terms like "tension" and "pressure" may have differed between participants. In the discussion, Oltmann also suggests that a tension between personal and professional views might require further education of librarians or a revision of the standards, but it may just as easily be a natural part of working in intellectual freedom and a span of interpretations of the meaning of tension. In light of the finding that the political stances of communities do not have a significant impact on the intellectual freedom support of participants, it seems plausible that the tension might only represent a professional standard that is upheld despite a diversity of personal ethical frameworks. As the author suggests, a deeper qualitative look into the perspectives of collection development librarians could help augment the findings of this study.

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