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**Patron Objections to Library Materials:
A Survey of Christian College Libraries
Part I**

**by
Craighton Hippenhammer**

Abstract

A survey of conservative Christian college libraries in the United States and Canada was taken early in 1993 to determine how their librarians handle patron objections to their collections. Surveyed were their policies and procedures, the nature of their support for the Library Bill of Rights, the nature of challenges (84 percent reported students were the objectors), selection of controversial materials, intellectual freedom definitions and level of librarian education. The survey is compared to four other surveys, covering academic libraries, school libraries, and/or public libraries. Included is a sample reconsideration policy and a sample reconsideration form. Having such a policy is shown to be crucial in standing up to censorship attempts. The survey appears here in two parts, one in this issue, one in the next.

Introduction

To my knowledge, there has never been a survey of evangelical Christian college

librarians to determine the current state of practice and belief on censorship and intellectual freedom questions. There is tension in examining the subject because of the dual nature of freedom: on one hand, evangelicals, like others with a strong point of view they think is right, are thankful for being in a country that allows them to push that agenda; on the other hand, some of them are perturbed at having to allow others the freedom to air contrary views to it. When, in the normal course of a day's events, one's life emphasizes community over individualism, a highly individualistic interpretation of intellectual freedom may be difficult for such groups to swallow. The tension is then heightened when key professional organizations like the American Library Association support the individualistic viewpoint. How, then, do evangelical Christian librarians deal with the subject?

I originally intended to survey Christian College Coalition institutions of higher learning to see what librarians at protestant liberal arts colleges thought, but discussions with other librarians persuaded me to include Bible Colleges in the survey as well. Of the 122 valid surveys mailed out in November, 1992, with a follow-up mailing for non-returns in February, 1993, 91 were returned for a 74.6 percent return ratio, validating my hypothesis that there would be high interest in the project. Sixty-seven percent of the returns were from Christian College Coalition colleges, and 33 percent were from Bible Colleges (schools that usually limit themselves to theological and church-related majors).

Of the surveys returned, 74.7 percent came from denominational schools and 25.3 percent came from non-denominational or inter-denominational schools (schools not supported by just a single denomination). I hypothesized that denominational schools would

turn out to be more conservative, but this did not turn out to be the case.

Surveys were received from Canada and every section of the United States. From the Northeast (ME, NH, VT, MA, CN, RI, NY, PA, NJ) came 9.9 percent of the surveys; 24.2 percent came from the Southeast (DE, MD, VA, WV, KY, TN, NC, SC, GA, AL, MS, FL); 15.4 percent came from the Great Lakes area (OH, IN, MI); 16.5 percent came from the North Central region (IL, WI, IA, MN, ND, SD, NE); 9.9 percent came from the South Central region (MO, AR, LA, KS, OK, TX, CO, NM); 7.7 percent came from the Northwest (MT, WY, ID, WA, OR, AK); and 6.6 percent from the Southwest (UT, AZ, NV, CA, HI); 9.9 percent came from Canada.

Findings

Twenty questions were asked on the survey, some, multi-part. The questions covered library policy and procedures for handling patron objections, support for the American Library Association's Library Bill of Rights, the number and nature of challenges to collections, selection of controversial materials, and the level of librarian education.

Policies and Procedures

Most Christian college libraries have a policy for handling challenges (patron objections) to library resources: some 72.5 percent say they have a policy. Only 68.2 percent of this number, however, are written policies, which means that only 49.5 percent of all libraries responding have a written policy. It is interesting to note that 80 percent of Bible colleges responding have a challenge policy while only 68.9 percent of Christian College Coalition (CCC) colleges have such a policy.

According to survey results, only 13.6 percent of policies have been adopted by the colleges' boards of trustees; only 39.4 percent of policies contain a reconsideration form. If other methods for obtaining written information (such as required letters from the objector) are included, the percent increases to 47. It is important to include some sort of standardized response form for reconsideration attempts because it helps challengers to put their objections in non-emotional black and white, it helps the library to determine the true nature of the concern, and it helps decision makers to determine whether the institution's collection development policy has been followed. A sample challenge policy and a sample reconsideration formⁱ will be published in the next issue of this journal.

The mix of individuals who are involved in the process of handling challenges to library materials varies considerably: the library director is involved 92.7 percent of the time; faculty committees, 58.5 percent of the time; academic dean, 45.1 percent; other librarians, 28.9 percent; the college president, 15.9 percent; trustees, 9.8 percent; other administrators, 8.5 percent; others (staff, patrons, etc.), 8.5 percent.

When asked which individual in the college made the final decision on the fate of the challenged material, the library director made it 53.8 percent of the time; a faculty committee, 21.3 percent; the academic dean, 10 percent; the college president, 10 percent; other librarians, 8.8 percent; trustees, 6.3 percent; and other administrators, 3.8 percent.

Library Bill of Rights Support

A copy of the ALA's Library Bill of Rights was included in the survey. Its six paragraphs read as follows:

"The American Library Association affirms that all libraries are forums for information and ideas, and that the following basic policies should guide their services.

"1. Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves. Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views of those contributing to their creation.

"2. Libraries should provide materials and information presenting all points of view on current and historical issues. Materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval.

"3. Libraries should challenge censorship in the fulfillment of their responsibility to provide information and enlightenment.

"4. Libraries should cooperate with all persons and groups concerned with resisting abridgment of free expression and free access to ideas.

"5. A person's right to use a library should not be denied or abridged because of origin, age, background, or views.

"6. Libraries which make exhibit spaces and meeting rooms available to the public they serve should make such facilities available on an equitable basis, regardless of the beliefs or affiliations of individuals or groups requesting their use."ⁱⁱ

I asked the librarians who filled out the surveys about their own personal support for the Library Bill of Rights and to also give whether they thought their own library's official policy supported the LBR. In answer to this question, the librarian's personal support surpassed official library policy: a low 8.1 percent of librarians said they definitely did not support it, but

more than double (16.7 percent) that number said their official library policy did not support it. The "yes" vote carried 45.3 percent of the librarians, and 46.5 percent who said they supported part of it. Official library policies which supported it totally added up to 41 percent, and 42.2 percent of the policies supported part of it.

Christian College Coalition library policies supported the Library Bill of Rights more than Bible Colleges: 49.1 percent of CCC policies supported it, 12.7 percent said no to it, and 38.2 percent said they supported part of it; 25 percent of the Bible Colleges supported it, 25 percent did not support it, and 50 percent supported part of it.

Denominational college policies supported the LBR with a 44.3 percent "yes" vote; 14.8 percent don't support it, and 41 percent part of it. Non-denominational and inter-denominational college policies supported it less strongly: 31.8 percent "yes," 22.7 percent "no," and 45.5 percent "part."

The most librarian support for the LBR was in the North: NE, 55.6 percent for, 0 percent against, and 44.4 percent "part"; NC, 66.7 percent for, 6.7 percent against, 26.7 percent "part"; and NW, 71.4 percent for, 0 percent against, 28.6 percent "part." Canadians had the most disparity between personal belief and library policy: librarians were 50 percent for, 0 percent against, and 50 percent "part"; Canadian library policies were 25 percent for, 50 percent against, and 25 percent "part."

Those who had objections to the Library Bill of Rights were asked which paragraphs they objected to. Librarians gave more negative personal opinions than official objections, seemingly contradicting their previous statements of support: paragraph 1, librarian personal

opinion was 7.1 percent against and official library policy was 4.8 percent against; paragraph 2, librarian 10.6 percent against and library 10.8 percent against; paragraph 3, 12.9 percent and 7.2 percent; paragraph 4, 22.4 percent and 14.4 percent; paragraph 5, 4.7 percent and 3.6 percent; paragraph 6, 20 percent and 16.9 percent.

The librarians who filled out the survey were asked for specific reasons why they objected to any part of the Library Bill of Rights (60.5 percent listed no objections). Some listed more than one reason. The reasons are as follows:

1. 14.9 percent: meeting rooms are not available to the general public; it would not be appropriate for private institutions with a specific viewpoint to allow groups who are antagonistic to that viewpoint to use their facilities.
2. 11.5 percent: private institutions limit cooperation with groups of unlike mind.
3. 8.0 percent: we exclude some materials.
4. 6.9 percent: we support the LBR in principle, depending on how it is interpreted.
5. 5.7 percent: the LBR (Library Bill of Rights) allows pornography.
6. 4.6 percent: the library collection is limited to the school's goals/mission.
7. 3.4 percent: the LBR is not the ultimate authority.
8. 3.4 percent: children are excluded from academic library use.
9. 3.4 percent: the LBR seems to be written for and most suitable for public libraries; we are not a public library.
10. 2.3 percent: the library collection is limited to materials that support the school's curriculum.

11. 1.1 percent: alternate views are represented in the collection but in a limited or mild way.

12. 18.4 percent: other miscellaneous responses, which include some reasons for support of the LBR, and others which give various reasons why the LBR is weak and/or inadequate.

The most strongly worded miscellaneous response in defense of censorship was stated as follows: "Any culture, which wishes to maintain some cultural ideals, practices certain minimal levels of censorship, and while admitting that "cultural ideals" is a very slippery term for a transitory value, there are identifiable aspects of those ideals, which libraries as part of that culture must heed. Hence some form of censoring must be done (and all libraries do censor, to some degree, by their acquisition process). Those who claim to oppose any censorship are either anarchistic, deceptive or stupid."

Nature of Challenges

To the question "How many challenges have there been to book and non-book resources in your library in the last two years?" 51.6 percent said they had had no challenges; 48.4 percent said they had had one or more challenges. The latter category breaks down as follows: one challenge, 14.3 percent; two challenges, 17.6 percent; three, 5.5 percent; four, 4.3 percent; five, 3.3 percent; six, 1.1 percent; seven, 0.0 percent; eight, 2.2 percent. This averages out to 1.2 challenges per site over the last two years.

The question "From whom did your challenges come?" was answered by the 48.4 percent who said they had had challenges. Their responses broke down as follows: 84.1

percent mentioned students; staff, 20.5 percent; professors, 20.5 percent; spouse or other school-related persons, 13.6 percent; other persons representing themselves, not a group, 11.4 percent; administrators, 4.6 percent; parents, 2.3 percent; librarians, 2.3 percent.

All but four of the 44 sites that said they had challenges responded with at least one reason that objectors gave for objecting to library materials. Of the 40 sites giving reasons, 52.5 percent mentioned nudity, sexual explicitness; 22.5 percent mentioned pornography; Satanic, witchcraft, New Age, paganistic, cultic materials, 25 percent; foul language, vulgarity, 10 percent; advocates false worship, false theology, 10 percent; represented a non-Christian, secular-humanistic perspective, 7.5 percent; sexist, demeaning-to-women materials, 7.5 percent; poorly written, 2.5 percent; sex education approach was challenged as being weak, 2.5 percent; other miscellaneous (often vague) challenge reasons, 37.5 percent.

When a Christian college library is challenged, do decision makers in the institution adhere to its policy? Unfortunately, they follow their policies totally only 41.8 percent of the time, partially 31.3 percent of the time, and not at all 6 percent of the time; 17.9 percent answering this question reported having no policy and 3 percent gave miscellaneous answers.

What were the final results of challenges to library collections? In 61.1 percent of the cases, the resource was retained; 22.2 percent were removed; 7.8 percent were restricted; 5.6 percent were altered; 3.3 percent gave miscellaneous answers.

The survey showed a definite degradation of retention of materials if a policy is not followed. If the policy is followed totally, the material is retained 72.7 percent of the time. If it is followed in part, material is retained 71.4 percent of the time. But if the policy is not

followed at all, material is retained only 50 percent of the time.

The result of not having a policy at all, however, is much worse. In perhaps one of the most significant findings of the survey, the effect of not having a policy is startling. Of those libraries who have a policy, whether they follow it or not, materials were retained in 66.2 percent of challenge cases and removed in 16.2 percent of the cases. But those libraries which have no policy retain only 26.7 percent and remove a whopping 66.7 percent.

Bible college libraries lose more materials to challenges than Christian College Coalition libraries. CCC libraries retain 71.7 percent and remove 13.2 percent while Bible college libraries retain 45.9 percent and remove 35.1 percent.

In a puzzling finding, non-denominational and inter-denominational college libraries remove many more materials because of challenges than denominational college libraries. Denominational libraries retained 65.5 percent of materials and removed 10.9 percent; non/inter-denominational libraries retained 54.3 percent and removed 40 percent.

Selection of Controversial Subjects

On one hand, in 96.6 percent of all the schools surveyed, the librarians said that controversial views are represented in their libraries, views that are contrary to the views of their schools' constituencies. The reasons they gave for including such "dangerous" material are as follows:

1. The stuff of education is conflicting ideas, 28.4 percent. Some librarians put it this way: "We are a college and we deal in ideas." "Our responsibility is to God's creation and the world as it really exists, not as we might like it to exist." "We search for the truth." "Part

of the liberal arts agenda is exposure, and creative and informed response." "Dealing with controversial ideas is an important aspect of learning to think critically." "Evangelicals need to be challenged." "Students must be able to listen critically to the voices of our culture." "We value the students' right to form their own opinions on life issues."

2. It is important to have materials that cover a variety of positions on an issue, 25.9 percent.

3. Our students must study non-Christian/contrary views, 17.3 percent.

4. We educate our students; we don't indoctrinate, 4.9 percent.

5. We follow the Library Bill of Rights and/or our own collection development policy, 3.7 percent.

6. Our constituency is broad, 3.7 percent.

7. Such materials are purchased but are limited by presentation type, 2.5 percent.

One librarian said, "Explanatory rather than advocatory materials are available." Another said, "There are some, but usually only in a mild form."

8. Other miscellaneous responses, 13.6 percent.

On the other hand, 67.9 percent of the sites surveyed said they excluded one or more controversial subjects or types of material from their collections. Of the Christian liberal arts colleges (CCC) surveyed, 61.8 percent excluded material, and 80.8 percent of Bible colleges excluded material.

Subjects mentioned as being excluded because of their controversial nature are as follows: Pornography, 40.7 percent; material not relevant to the curriculum, 7.4 percent; New

Age, witchcraft, Satanism, occult materials, 7.4 percent; cult materials published by cults, 4.9 percent; sex, 3.7 percent; materials advocating homosexuality, 3.7 percent; other miscellaneous responses, 29.6 percent.

Intellectual Freedom Definitions

To the question, "What does intellectual freedom mean to you?" the following categories of definitions were discovered.

1. The **freedom to explore** ideas, to search for truth, to research without fear of the results of that search, mentioned by 36.4 percent of the librarians.
2. Not being denied **access to materials**; the right to access the knowledge of humankind, 15.6 percent.
3. Making a **variety of points of view** available for study, 15.6 percent.
4. To **measure ideas against the Bible**, 11.7 percent. Examples of what the librarians meant by this are as follows in their own words: "Freedom to explore ideas and judge them in the light of revealed truth in scripture." "To be given the opportunity to think God's thoughts after Him in every academic discipline... consistent with the authority on truth, God's revealed word." "To have enough information to evaluate any material presented in light of the absolutes of the Bible." "Freedom to pursue truth within Biblical standards for truth, as opposed to freedom of expression without bounds." "The freedom to think Biblically about any subject." "It is the freedom to explore all points of view with a view to comparing or contrasting it to a Biblical world view."
5. **Freedom to read** many views, including those most people disagree with, 7.8

percent.

6. Other miscellaneous responses, 26 percent.

Librarian Education

Library directors filled out 87.4 percent of the surveys; other librarians filled out 12.6 percent. The percent of survey takers who had the Masters of Library Science degree was 93.3 percent. Broken down by type of college the figures are: 98.3 percent of the CCC librarians had the MLS; 83.3 percent of Bible college librarians had the MLS; librarians who worked at denominational schools, 95.6 percent; librarians who worked at non/and inter-denominational schools, 86.4 percent.

Survey-taking librarians who had a second advanced degree numbered 57.5 percent. When broken down by type of college, the figures stayed fairly consistent: CCC, 58.6 percent; Bible colleges, 55.2 percent; denominational, 57.6 percent; non/inter-denominational, 57.1 percent. Most of the second advanced degrees were masters degrees: 47.1 percent filling out surveys had them; 13.8 percent of the survey takers had doctorates; 5.7 percent had the CAS (Certificate of Advanced Studies) degree.

The subjects the non-MLS degrees are in are as follows: theology, religion, 23 percent; education, 16.1 percent; social science, 8 percent; library and information science, 4.6 percent; English, 3.4 percent; science/math, 2.3 percent; business, 2.3 percent; music/arts, 2.3 percent; other miscellaneous, 5.7 percent.

Comments

No more than half of Christian college libraries have written policies for handling

objections to their collections. This means that at least half of the libraries are making do on an ad hoc basis and that the issue of intellectual freedom has probably not been discussed among the librarians, let alone with other faculty members and administrators. Controversial issues are much better dealt with out in the open so all in the community the library serves understand what policies are in force.

Most of the challenges to Christian college collections come from students (84.1 percent). This is a major discovery, new to the library community, I believe. Students on our campuses are simply shocked to learn that Christian colleges would provide information that disagrees with the shared beliefs of the school's constituency. Christian colleges, after all, have carved out a niche in the educational marketplace by claiming their students get not only an excellent education, taught by real professors and not graduate students, but also a moral foundation in a nurturing environment. When the real "wicked world" intrudes into their protected space they are surprised. I think most of the requests for reconsideration by students are not challenges at all but are requests for an explanation of this apparent discrepancy: How could a Christian library have anything immoral in it? Most of these requests are informal and never get to a formal stage once library policy (and hopefully, intellectual freedom) is explained. Librarians should be sensitive to these distinctions.

Pornography is the number one intellectual freedom problem for Christian librarians. More than 40 percent exclude it specifically from their collections and nothing else comes close. Part of the problem is that many librarians at Christian colleges don't believe there is a distinction between selection and censorship. Several of the survey takers stated exactly that.

The traditional explanation of the difference is that selection is done for positive reasons, and censorship is done for negative reasons. At first glance this may seem foolish, because the result may be the same: if you can never find positive reasons for selecting pornography, pornography still remains absent from your collection. But being open to selecting anything means that librarians must continually look at the distasteful, the unpopular, the socially unacceptable, the unfamiliar, the strangely new, for that which may turn out to be socially valuable, and perhaps even more moral than anything that's gone before. Excluding any subject a priori, including frank depictions of sex, closes down those positive possibilities, something responsible librarians would want to avoid doing, I would think. Surely the positive approach of selection is far superior to the negative one of censorship. The difference, though a subtle one of attitude and approach, is important.

Recommendations

The fact that 50 percent of Christian college libraries do not have a written policy to guide challenges to their materials is cause for concern. Those who do not have one should create a written "challenge to library materials" section in their collection development policies. Thinking through the issues as applied to each individual college situation is a valuable exercise, and once written, the policy will guide libraries responsibly through what can be turbulent waters.

Librarians should add a reconsideration form to their policies if they do not yet have one. Such forms help the college get the facts straight and help the challengers to order their thoughts.

The final authority for censorship decisions should rest in more hands than just one librarian if the process gets to the formal stage. The final decision-making body, in my opinion, should be a library committee consisting of the library director, a second librarian, the academic dean, three or more division heads, and one or more faculty members whose area of expertise is being challenged. The committee should have intellectual freedom expertise on it: requiring two librarians as members will increase the chance that that expertise will be well rounded. Depending on size of institution and other factors, in general, college presidents and boards of trustees should be involved in the adoption of the policy rather than in the determination of whether the policy was adhered to within each challenge situation.

The library material challenge policy should be adopted by the board of trustees; at the very least it should be adopted by the faculty senate. Appropriate parts may be included in the faculty manual.

Emphasize the positive aspects of selection in your collection development policy and don't exclude any subject a priori if possible. If the community within which you work is adamant that you must exclude subjects or types of material, then put them in your written policy. Although I have yet to see a proof, I suspect that self-censorship under a written policy with exclusions that match real expectations will be less than under no policy or a policy that mentions no exclusions but where exclusions are assumed. There's also the matter of honesty.

Finally, add a unit on intellectual freedom to your bibliographic instruction classes. The fact that student expectations are so out of line shows the need for training in the subject.

Survey Design

There are always things you wish you'd done differently when you design a research project. I had originally intended to survey all the Christian College Coalition colleges, and did so. The Bible colleges I surveyed were added in my thinking process late, and rather than getting a broad, comprehensive selection of them, I selected only those Bible colleges who had members in the Association of Christian Librarians. Therefore, the selection of Bible colleges may be slanted, having more librarians involved with a professional organization than a true cross section might have produced. This might have produced the high number of Bible colleges who had written selection policies.

I detected some eagerness to confess to censorship attempts. While I asked respondents to limit the patron challenges to their collections to the last two years, I got the feeling some remembered back further than that. One librarian said he hadn't had any in the last two years and proceeded to relate the several that had occurred in the previous ten. Needless to say, I negated them.

Further Research Needs

Research projects usually turn up more areas that need study. "Pornography" is a slippery term. It would be interesting to see what definitions librarians have of the word and

how they make use of them.

There needs to be a study of intellectual freedom policies comparing all types of academic libraries, state and private, secular and religious. Subjects most often excluded on the right and left need to be examined closely for their exact nature and extent of exclusion.

Additional study of "Mild Forms" of controversial topics is needed. Lurking in between the lines of this study was the insinuation that objective information about the "wrong side" of controversial topics was fine to include in the collection, but not strong advocacy arguments. This may be a subtle sort of censorship policy in effect: stacking the deck by omitting the most powerful arguments and most persuasive pieces for the side of a controversial issue the institution wants to discourage students from adopting.

Notes

- i. American Library Association, Office for Intellectual Freedom, Intellectual Freedom Manual, 4th ed. (Chicago: American Library Association, 1992), 217. ALA calls their reconsideration form a "complaint form."
- ii. Ibid., 3.