

Divisive Politics and Threats to Academic Libraries

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ABSTRACT

Libraries and the expertise of library professionals have been under direct, political threat since 2021. Book bans and criminalization efforts have targeted both library professionals and educators in schools and public libraries, but higher education and academic librarians will not escape the societal dividers being wedged into place. If the goal is to destabilize society and shake the foundations of democracy, libraries, schools, and colleges and universities will continue to find themselves in the crosshairs of this cultural conflict. Humanities, Liberal Arts, and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion have been maligned and are being diminished, language itself is being redefined to fit a narrative. Research freedoms are being tested and information literacy faces an onslaught of mis- and disinformation and partisan investigations. While there will be no direct attacks on academic library professionals, self-censorship, program and course elimination, and conservative scrutiny of funding, endowments, and research areas will impact academic libraries and their content and technology providers. These same provocations can serve as catalysts for library professionals to step up, provide resources, and serve the needs of their institutions. In an information war, information professionals are the best guides within the academic community to confront these assaults.

Academic librarianship has long been concerned with core topics such as open access, digital preservation, and copyright. While these remain critical issues for the profession, it's also important for library leaders to address the politicization of thought that is impacting the larger scholarly community. As information professionals, librarians are uniquely positioned to leverage our expertise to help solve the problems being encountered on campus. By understanding the pain points currently at play in higher education and by doubling down on the power of information, technology, and collaboration, academic librarians can set a path for their institutions rather than being reactive to social and political turbulence.

Libraries of all types are under threat, and academic institutions are no exception. Issues including censorship, anti-access, and discrimination are impacting school, public, and academic libraries, as well as their professional organizations and content and technology providers. State legislation impacting print books have been proposed and passed, but legislation also affects collection development, tenure, library programming, funding, the accreditation process, professional certifications, contract language, and affirmative defense protections for library professionals.

Academic librarians are experiencing an increasingly complex and evolving set of threats to the profession. The politicization of educational content, coupled with movements that seek to undermine Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) principles, and limit the teaching of the humanities, social sciences including sociology and gender studies, call for a robust response from the academic library community. These challenges are not merely external pressures but reflect deeper societal divisions that penetrate the core of academic inquiry and freedom. The profession finds itself at a juncture where the response will be vital to the future of academic inquiry and scholarship.

Anti-library groups and their campaigns targeting public libraries and schools have created a climate of professional self-censorship, online and in-person attacks on teachers and librarians, and the vilification of the profession's accrediting association. The preservation of intellectual freedom and the commitment to providing access to a diverse range of perspectives and information is under scrutiny. Academic librarians must be proactive in addressing these issues and standing up for the values of intellectual freedom, access to information, the importance of libraries in society and their own profession.

Threats to DEI are Core Threats to Academic Libraries

The divisive lexicon of American politics in 2024 includes attacks on academic institutions, faculty, university leadership, and endowments. For academic librarians, emerging and reactivated threats include mandated shifts from the social sciences and the humanities to STEM at state-funded universities, the introduction of outcomes-based curriculum, the elimination of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) and other programs or courses of study, threats to research, and the elimination of tenure and the freedom of thought it protects. State funding for higher education is being leveraged to alter programs, staffing, and even institutional directions.

Campus speech, academic freedoms, and student protests have been brought into a larger anti-elite, anti-DEI campaign, which pushes an oft-repeated narrative that conservative thought is being suppressed in academia. In a January 13, 2024 Op-ed in *The Hill*, entitled, "Higher education needs to reform itself. It also needs to defend itself,"¹ PEN America Freedom to Learn Program Director Jeremy C. Young wrote about bills that have passed in multiple states that he called "higher education gag orders," amounting to "government censorship," and an expanding effort to "undermine the university governance structures that protect academic freedom." The common element in many of these efforts is the people advancing an anti-academic agenda. "While there are very real problems on college campuses...bad-faith actors are using this as a pretext to promote a longstanding and largely unrelated political agenda that is hostile to higher education as a whole," which Young called a "coordinated attack."

This pressure on the academy is not only at the local and state level. The current Republican Speaker of the House, Rep. Mike Johnson, has blamed "the academy"² for the Republican Party losing "more highly educated voters." He said universities "are run by liberals almost entirely and sometimes by radical liberals," and claimed, "students are being indoctrinated rather than educated." A report published by the University of California National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement entitled, "The Politics of the Professoriate: A Social Media Approach"³ reviewed the existing literature and faculty social media and draws a different conclusion. "American higher education has long been considered a politically progressive space and for good reason... This perception that American colleges and universities

are progressive and thus inherently liberal has, however, made them a consistent target of conservatives on and off campuses, who have alleged discrimination against conservative students and faculty members and who have argued that campuses have become spaces of indoctrination, not education... Progressive and conservative researchers have explored both phenomena...and identified no evidence that conservative students or faculty are discriminated against in college. The idea that liberal faculty are indoctrinating students has been similarly debunked... This lack of evidence, however, has not stopped the publication of many books and the careers of many conservative commentators and politicians who continue to advance the belief in liberal indoctrination and discrimination against conservatives without support."

The conservative Claremont Institute report, *How Texas A&M Went Woke*,⁴ endeavors to break down the university's transformation into what the author Scott Yenor calls "a typical, leftist American university."⁵ A New York Times investigation, 'American Under Attack' Inside the Anti-D.E.I. Crusade⁶ scrutinized the anti-DEI efforts of Yenor and others that have led to anti-DEI laws around the country that have scaled back or eliminated DEI on college campuses. The story showcased discussions including Yenor determining that, "Terms like 'diversity'...need to be saddled with more negative connotations," While also writing, "'We should use the term that is most likely to stigmatize the movement... While nobody wanted to seem in favor of discrimination,' he argued, 'social justice' could be 'stigmatized so that when people hear it they can act on their suspicions.'"

These attacks on DEI programs on campus are not just about rhetoric, laws are being passed that throttle or eliminate DEI positions and programs. Multiple states have dismantled DEI programs on state college campuses in 2024, closing DEI offices and eliminating DEI positions and faculty appointments as well as DEI-focused contracts with outside vendors. The politicization of educational content, coupled with movements that seek to undermine Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion principles, has created a need for a robust response from the academic library community. These challenges are not merely external pressures but reflect deeper societal divisions that penetrate the core of scholarly inquiry and freedom. This puts the preservation of intellectual freedom and the commitment to providing access to a diverse range of perspectives and information under scrutiny. We find ourselves at a moment where our response will be vital to the future of academic inquiry and scholarship.

The Future of the Institution

The idea of establishing the American Academy⁷ may not have been a familiar campaign talking point, but the former/future president's plan as outlined in Agenda 47 mixes a revolutionary way to consider higher education, with a description that sounds like a library.

"This institution will gather an entire universe of the highest quality educational content, covering the full spectrum of human knowledge and skills, and make that material available to every American citizen online for free."

Rather than providing classes, the American Academy will grant degree credentials that the US Government and all "federal contractors will henceforth recognize." It's how to pay for the American Academy that might be the biggest surprise, a corporate raider's view,

not of private equity, but of private institutions and university endowments which it seems is where the money is.

“We will take the billions and billions of dollars that we will collect by taxing, fining, and suing excessively large private university endowments, and we will then use that money to endow a new institution called the American Academy.”

A “Critic Panic” on Campus

Anti-DEI campaigns are closely intertwined with previous efforts to vilify the term Critical Race Theory (CRT), and they underpin a broader social engineering agenda that attempts to manipulate public discourse. In 2021, efforts to “freeze” the brand of “critical race theory” signaled an intentional strategy to sow discord and reshape societal perceptions. The stated goal, to turn the term “toxic” by lumping various “cultural insanities” under the CRT brand, reveals an attempt to trigger what could be called a Critanic Panic. Much like its precursor the Satanic Panic of the 1980s and 90s, Critanic Panic describes an artificially inflated manufactured moral panic that is leveraged by certain political factions to rally a base, instigate division, and undermine educational efforts that aim to address and redress historical and contemporary injustices. The false panic about CRT was designed to galvanize opposition against what is, in essence, a complex legal framework pertaining to American law and structural racism, by falsely associating it with a profound and negative impact on K-12 education and curriculum, an impact it, as an academic legal theory, does not inherently possess. DEI, “Woke,” and the next manufactured outrage are outgrowths of the Critanic Panic playbook, one strategy, set on repeat, a MadLibs strategy in which the messaging is set in advance and awaits the next phrase/issues/“crisis,” to be set in motion.

The hijacking of terms and subsequent public perception is not a novel tactic; it has long been recognized as a fundamental instrument for reality manipulation. Philip K. Dick, a noted science fiction writer, once remarked, “The basic tool for the manipulation of reality is the manipulation of words. If you can control the meaning of words, you can control the people who must use the words.” The Critanic Panic around CRT, DEI, and other issues exemplifies this manipulation of words, leveraging linguistic control to influence and often mislead public opinion. The Panic Theory steers the discourse away from factual understandings of the issues at hand. Discourse, debate, and understanding are not the goals. The anger and fear, the panic, that can be generated and mobilized are the provocation.

Academic Librarians must be acutely aware of such linguistic manipulations. Librarians are not merely keepers of information but also stewards of knowledge who facilitate the critical examination of ideas and promote informed dialogue. The creation of a Critanic Panic poses a direct challenge to this mission, as it seeks to discredit the very foundations upon which collections and services are built—the diverse and equitable representation of voices and experiences.

The library professional’s role in advancing intellectual freedom becomes even more crucial in an era where terms like CRT and DEI are weaponized to stifle academic inquiry. Academic librarians must engage in and promote critical literacy. It is their role to help students, faculty, and researchers recognize the distinction between disinformation campaigns and scholarly debate. By curating collections that reflect a multiplicity of perspectives, hosting forums for discussion, and providing access to resources that delve into the rich and com-

plex history of race and law, library professionals can actively counteract the effects of the next Critanic Panic. We must also educate our users about the strategic deployment of rhetorical framing in public discourse, equipping students and others with the tools to discern and analyze the intentions behind the information they consume.

Information and Disinformation

Political efforts to spread misinformation and disinformation about the integrity of federal elections became more intense on campuses following the 2020 presidential election cycle. This movement to discredit research by sociologists, political scientists, and other researchers could have had a chilling effect on research into disinformation efforts and threats to election integrity during the 2024 election cycle. Nationally, politically motivated efforts are underway to chill research on disinformation and election interference. Academic researchers studying disinformation and election integrity have been subpoenaed by the House Select Subcommittee on the Weaponization of the Federal Government.

Members of the select House Investigative Subcommittee of the Judiciary claim researchers, government agencies, and technology companies are part of a “Censorship Industrial Complex”⁸ to “silence conservative voices.” State-funded institutions have received Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests for their research data and communications. Researchers and institutions are being sued or FOIA-ed by conservative organizations. Technology companies have sued researchers related to big data collection. Government employees have been told not to report disinformation to tech companies and universities. In the lead up to the 2024 elections, many of the organizations and researchers that worked to highlight election interference and min- and disinformation were scuttled or went silent either through budget cuts, layoffs, or self-censorship.

The issues of disinformation extend beyond academia. Tech companies scaled back their election integrity teams, changed ownership, or changed their approaches to political content since 2020. These same companies are also grappling with artificial intelligence adoption, leaving their disinformation efforts opaque.

While self-censorship is a reality that library professionals and their colleagues will need to address, academic censorship may be something they are likely to face or can prevent. In February 2024, a college professor in Florida tweeted that her institution had rejected her request to buy banned books for adult students taking part in her “privately funded Endowed Chair project on... ‘Banned Books & First Amendment Rights.’”⁹ School Library Journal reports that 35 percent of school librarians in a September 2022 survey¹⁰ self-censor often or always. However, less than half had experienced a formal book challenge, meaning that self-censorship is both preemptive and reactive. This pressure in K-12 has only grown since the survey and is moving into higher education.

Bellwether State Laws and Policies

Academic publishers of books, journals, and textbooks in the Humanities and Social Sciences are under threat in any of the more than 25 states that have passed or prioritized anti-library, anti-access legislation. The 2024 legislative cycle, which took place ahead of the Presidential election cycle saw library criminalization bills along with book banning legislation. Existing laws, even those being litigated, will impact anyone doing business with state consortia, buying groups, university systems, and state institutions.

Florida is still dealing with multiple laws passed in 2022 relating to school and classroom libraries as well as education, including the takeover of a traditionally liberal college by the Republican Governor. The chair of the Florida Democratic Party, Nikki Fried, declared “we have been the lab rats for the Heritage Foundation here in the state of Florida, so we understand the threat that is coming from Project 2025.” Oklahoma made headlines when State Superintendent Ryan Walters announced his support for a PragerU curriculum to replace existing state standards. In a September 2023 press release, Superintendent Walters said that “PragerU Kids provides educational, entertaining, pro-American kids content,” which he referred to as “high quality materials rich in American history and values.” Thus far, school districts throughout the state have declined to add PragerU content into their curricula.¹¹ The same State Superintendent added a controversial social media influencer, who is not a library professional or an Oklahoma resident, to a state library advisory committee.¹² He is also requiring the Bible and the Ten Commandments be incorporated into school curricula. In Missouri, the language of a rule change proposed by the Secretary of State in 2023, would have required each of the approximately 900,000 K-12 students in the state to have an individual database account to access state library databases. This proposal lacked a plan for where and how the personal identifying information (PII) of these students would be collected, retained, and stored.

STEM, Humanities, and Academic Libraries

A resurgent tide of anti-intellectualism in the United States poses a significant threat to higher education institutions' traditional roles and values. Critics of academia often dismiss the social sciences and humanities, claiming that they lack practicality compared to the hard sciences, which are seen as more directly linked to technological and economic progress. This perspective not only undermines the comprehensive nature of higher education but also threatens to diminish the essential skills and values that these disciplines foster, including critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and social awareness.

An anti-humanities stance is particularly evident in ongoing debates over educational policy and resource allocation. Several states are actively aiming to reshape academic curricula to better serve economic interests, often at the expense of the liberal arts and other disciplines that promote creativity and a deep understanding of complex social issues. The Florida Commissioner of Education claimed in a December 2023 Tweet¹³ that “sociology has been hijacked by left-wing activists and no longer serves its intended purpose as a general knowledge course for students.” North Carolina legislators passed a FY2024 budget bill that ended funding for any new distinguished professorships, scholars, or fellows at public universities unless they were in STEM subject areas. The funding restrictions impact new roles, while existing endowment funds will allow for current non-STEM professorships to continue.

The Oklahoma Education Superintendent has called for state colleges and universities to eliminate gender studies. In December 2023 he proposed new guidelines for libraries calling the American Library Association guidelines on information literacy “woke”¹⁴ in an interview with KOCO. The new guidelines for Oklahoma are “entirely skill-based and grade-based” according to KOCO. A Nebraska bill being considered since 2023 targeted database companies specifically with claims about pornographic content. In Mississippi, the State Auditor reviewed all courses being taught at state-funded institutions in 2023¹⁵ and recommended the elimination of funding for Anthropology, African American Studies, and Women and Gender Studies, while calling for an outcomes-based model as a way to counter the brain

drain in the state and encourage graduates to remain in Mississippi. A 2023 law impacting libraries and content providers now regulates digital and online resources in K-12 and public schools. While specifically not including academic institutions or impacting dual-enrolled students, the law sets out terms for withholding payment from vendors for noncompliance. While language was added to allow for curing, the bill demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of the size and scale of statewide contracts which often include academic institutions.

This trend goes beyond a mere shift in educational policies. It reflects a broader cultural question about the value of knowledge and the purpose of education. The diminishing role of social sciences and humanities in academic curricula undermines the role of education in fostering a democratic society ready to tackle diverse ideas and challenges. As educational institutions grapple with these pressures, they must advocate for a balanced education that recognizes the intrinsic value of all disciplines. It is essential to defend the liberal arts as they play a vital role in developing informed citizens capable of contributing to a diverse and pluralistic society. They must also resist the reduction of libraries to mere technical workshops and assert the importance of literature, history, and the arts in nurturing the intellectual and cultural growth of young minds.

Dual Enrollment as the Achilles Heel of Intellectual Freedom on Campus

Enacted and proposed state legislation impacting academic institutions have increased. Issues that had only previously impacted only K-12 or public libraries have started to surface in Higher Ed. One under-appreciated issue is that of dual-enrolled students. When laws about censorship, access, and privacy are written without the guidance of library professionals who understand the ramifications of proposed changes, dual enrollment students can create tremendous challenges for academic libraries and their parent institutions.

Dual enrollment programs allow high school students, often under age 18, to enroll in college courses for credit before graduating high school. Students can start their college education early rather than waiting until they are in college to start earning credits. Dual enrollment programs can broaden high school students' educational opportunities and provide financial benefits by reducing the time and cost of completing a college degree. Unlike other accelerated learning options, such as Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB), dual enrollment programs offer college-level courses rather than courses that might lead to college credit based on exam performance.

Dual enrollment has emerged as a crucial pathway for high school students to gain access to higher education. It is also a soft target for advocates of censorship and anti-access to find a new way into college and university campuses. These accelerated programs are designed to challenge students academically, expose them to higher education culture, and save both time and money on college education. However, integrating minors into the college environment calls for careful consideration of campus policies, particularly those concerning access, privacy, and safeguarding academic inquiry and free expression.

Anecdotal reports from the 2023 North Carolina Library Association conference indicated that parents' rights issues may be extending into colleges and universities. Academic librarians in attendance reported that parents of dual-enrolled students had visited their libraries asking about their collections. A bill passed in Oklahoma in 2022 impacted dual-enrolled students forcing academic institutions to go back to their content providers to update contract language and to determine whether the providers could comply with provisions requiring content curation designed for K-12 schools to be imposed on academic institutions

with students under 17 years of age. Until the institutions could create separate pathways to e-resources for students under age 18, these restrictions impacted all students, faculty, and researchers. The law was so problematic that a 2023 bill had to be passed to rework the provisions, prevent K-12 curation controls from being forced on the entire institution, and clarify whether the law included private institutions.

To continue to serve dual-enrolled students who are under 18, colleges and universities must ensure that their policies strike a delicate balance. While they must ensure that minors' rights and protections are in place, they must also avoid imposing overly restrictive or censorious measures on the broader college community. Information literacy instruction is crucial for dual enrollment students to succeed in college courses. Academic libraries could offer tailored information literacy programs for these students to develop research skills essential for success in college courses. Library administration should work closely with high schools to understand the specific needs of dual enrollment students. Library policies should address the physical safety of minors in the library, and staff should be trained to understand the unique needs of dual enrollment students. Academic libraries can create specific programs or outreach efforts aimed at dual enrollment students to better integrate them into the campus community and library culture.

Lessons for Higher Ed from No Child Left Behind

In the United States, the Higher Education Act (HEA) plays a crucial role in maintaining the quality and performance of educational institutions. One of the ways it does this is by addressing institutional accreditation, which ensures that institutions meet specific standards of quality. During reauthorization processes, Congress can make amendments and adjustments to the provisions related to accreditation.

The U.S. Department of Education, which the incoming president wants to eliminate, recognizes various accrediting agencies, including regional and national accreditors. Regional accreditors focus on non-profit institutions with an academic focus, while national accreditors review vocational or technical programs, including for-profit institutions. Accreditation is important because it impacts an institution's eligibility for federal funding and student financial aid. The HEA sets standards that accrediting agencies must meet to be recognized as reliable authorities on institutional quality. The next president has spoken about college accrediting bodies in his campaign platform Agenda 47. "When I return to the White House, I will fire the radical Left accreditors that have allowed our colleges to become dominated by Marxist Maniacs and lunatics. We will then accept applications for new accreditors who will impose real standards on colleges once again and once and for all."

The current accreditation standards for higher education institutions have evolved to include a significant emphasis on academic libraries within their accreditation rubrics. Libraries play a pivotal role in student learning and success, and are central to the educational mission of institutions. The Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) has developed a set of Standards for Libraries in Higher Education that provides a framework for libraries to demonstrate their alignment with the educational objectives of their institutions and support accreditation processes.

These accrediting bodies, which have been called out from criticism and replacement by conservative platforms have varying expectations and mentions of libraries in their standards. A change by the accrediting body, Higher Learning Commission, going into effect in 2025 removes requirements for libraries¹⁶ altogether. The conversation about the importance

of libraries and librarians in accreditation standards should reflect the current threat and a wider dialogue about the evolving role of libraries in higher education.

Academic libraries must be engaged with the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act to ensure that library contributions to educational quality are communicated and recognized within these frameworks. The Act is more than ten years overdue for reauthorization. Planning should be ongoing to avoid the pitfalls that befell school librarians when the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), introduced in 1965, was replaced with No Child Left Behind in 2001. No Child Left Behind ignored countless studies demonstrating the impact school librarians had on test scores and literacy, collection development quality and its support for the curriculum, and the quality of the technology libraries introduced to students and the schools themselves in the days before the proliferation of education technology.

No Child Left Behind decimated the school librarian profession by altering program certification and education requirements as well as accreditations, and even the adjustments in the 2015 reauthorization called the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) have not been able to resurrect the profession. In 2000, before No Child Left Behind went into effect, 86 percent of schools had librarians representing a growth from 40 percent in 1963 the year before the passage of the ESEA, according to the National Center for Education Statistics' report, *America's Public School Libraries: 1953-2000*. A 2019 American Library Association report indicated that only 61 percent of the schools with libraries employed full-time library professionals. The report was cited in "The Essential Leadership of School Librarians," a brief published by the International Literacy Association in 2022.

A 2018 *School Library Journal* article, "School Librarian Where Art Thou?," cited the National Center for Education Standards, which showed that "more than 10,000 full-time school librarian positions" were lost in the United States representing, at worst, 19 percent of the profession while changing job titles, including teacher librarian, and a lack of standardization around support staff reporting makes the numbers harder to quantify. An "Education Week Research Center analysis of federal data" (Common Core Data) verifies the nearly 20 percent loss between 2000 and 2015 (from 54,000 public school librarians in 2000 to 44,000 in 2015) while also highlighting the reductions impacted minority districts "the 20 districts that have lost the most librarians had on average 78 percent minority student populations." As of May 2022, the Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates there are nearly 49,500 elementary and secondary librarians employed in the United States.

Serving the Institution Benefits the Library

Library professionals have long been technology first adopters. They demand new technology from their content and technology providers, and when they don't get what they need, they are not shy about creating it themselves. Whether creating technology for their own use, making it open source to share with others, or partnering with businesses to create new services (as the original *Kuali Ole* libraries did when they partnered with libraries and service providers to build the *FOLIO* library services platform in 2019), library professionals are rarely late to the new technology party. Since they understand the need for and value of policies, and by bringing their expertise to policy making, strategy sessions, and future planning, library professionals can flex their dexterity and raise the profile of the library and the profession.

To library professionals, data analytics is nothing new. Library leaders and professionals from e-resource librarians to collection development experts have been collecting, leverag-

ing, and clamoring for more analytics for the better part of a decade. The debate is whether they are presenting the right facts to the right stakeholders to safeguard or increase their materials budget and staffing numbers and secure the library's place on campus. If libraries have the data and can indicate the ways in which they are influencing research and science, then budgets should reflect that influence.

If library leaders have not been able to make the connection or broaden the discussion to demonstrate the impact they can have on campus-wide priorities, new narratives must be sought, new scenarios created. Library professionals need to leverage the data analytics built into their library resources, created in-house, or crafted by peers to demonstrate value and scale up their offerings and their collections. Practical demonstrations of the impact of library services on core issues, including student success and retention and cost per student based on data from library resources or learning management systems (LMS), are just the start.

Academic librarians must take advantage of the opportunity to leverage their technical acumen. Instead of talking about getting a seat at the table, they need to pull up a chair, bring their analytics and know-how to that table, and start to contribute. Library professionals, who are well-versed in privacy and data protection, and fought for anonymization of user data, can confront the rapid rise in on-campus technology from the LMS to swipe cards and call for digital stewardship policies about the use of location and login information. Library professionals are well-positioned to help administrators leverage data analytics while protecting student privacy.

In addition to parleying their knowledge of analytics, library professionals need to ask themselves what they know about the larger issues impacting business and technology, research, and higher education. Academic libraries need to develop and leverage ways to share the latest news and competitive intelligence with administrators, department heads, faculty, and researchers. Being cognizant of institution-specific concerns (state bills, laws, or regulations), administrative policies and goals, or curriculum changes being driven by new technology, would allow library leaders to create opportunities to demonstrate the value of the library collection. Are librarians using library-only language when describing services — “full-text,” “serials,” “discovery services” — or are they letting decision makers know they can provide stakeholders with the latest articles from top journals, delivering competitive intelligence customized to each stakeholder's needs, right to their phones, emails, or online?

By identifying which departments dominate budgets, benchmarking, and administrative priorities; understanding which services or policies drive decision making; or identifying new and emerging areas of study, library professionals can begin to use the power of information to influence decision making and aid decision makers. By understanding the priorities, concerns, and pain points of institutional stakeholders, library professionals can use library services to set up alerts and send out newsletters based on institutional or departmental imperatives. Not only are these alerts and newsletters reminders of the resources available to stakeholders, they are also a reminder that library professionals are problem solvers. Each alert is an iteration and substantiation of the library itself.

Artificial intelligence is revolutionizing society. Most of the current discussion at the institutional level revolves around cheating concerns, the impact on research, and how to adjust teaching to address student access to ChatGPT and other AI resources. AI ultimately will impact the way institutions prepare students for their future careers. As guardians of technology, library professionals can also provide the testing needed to determine whether a new system allows for the provenance required to ensure students can cite sources and trace research back to the original source.

Preparing the Industry for Change

Librarians have a unique opportunity to leverage their technical expertise in any meaningful discussion of the future of academic libraries.

Library schools need to offer management training and ongoing professional development in leadership and management. Library leaders can either hold themselves apart from the institution or reinforce their role in the curriculum and as technology providers. Library schools should train future librarians to be more aware of the business of libraries, budgeting, advocacy, career paths, and the challenges facing the profession.

The industry must start discussing the more prominent issues threatening libraries, library professionals, and library businesses. For instance, state universities and libraries located in "Red States" will be affected by any legislation that impacts academic funding, tenure, DEI programs or related majors and courses, as well as by AI, threats to research freedoms, and laws affecting K-12 curriculum. Library professionals must respond by identifying allies and building coalitions and alliances that can educate legislators, counter detractors, and speak up for the profession.

Library administration can reach out to their former students, alumni, and local businesses surrounding the institution as potential supporters. A larger coalition can be built among union members on campus, faculty, and their larger associations. Publishers and content and technology providers are also facing legislation and threats to their business, and they need alliances. Library professionals need to discuss legislation with vendors and find common ground.

Library professionals must act if access to information is at risk and information itself is being vilified. Library leaders should act if research is in danger of being politicized or censored and if self-censorship or book bans start to impact scholarship. They must act with the knowledge that higher education and its institutions themselves are being targeted. So often library leaders lament not having a seat at the table at their institution, suppose publishers, library content and technology providers are singled out, and library contracts or budgets are threatened. In that case, library professionals need to pull up a chair and bang on that table.

Endnotes

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