

# Fight if You Can Win. Otherwise, Negotiate.

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## ABSTRACT

This article addresses the possibility of avoiding the negative consequences often resulting from progressive public library defeats in disputes over maintaining or establishing inclusive collections and services. Such unfortunate realities, usually in conservative or mixed-ideology communities, may be a seemingly inevitable result when a progressive director is attacked or fired or otherwise driven to leave, and the library's new director has a more conservative orientation. Such negative outcomes for collections, programs, and staffing can be the result of successful protests by influential members of a public library's service community, acting with or without outside help. This essay is grounded in the reality that some progressive librarianship is better than no progressive librarianship. In consequence, it seeks to provide a professional justification for an inclusive library board, director, and staff to negotiate with opposition leaders in their localities to preserve as much as possible of a progressive approach to inclusive library collections and services.

## A Parental Rights Encounter

Several years ago, the author arrived early at a public library for an interview with a library manager and a Dominican University School of Information Studies student doing a library practicum. It was an end-of-practicum review to discuss how well the placement had worked for both the student and the hosting library. While waiting for the manager and student to return from lunch, the author, who was standing by the new bookshelves, was approached by a woman who asked if he was a librarian. A "yes" response led the woman to demand that he look at the young adult book with sexually explicit material that she was holding. She then pressed for an explanation as to why the library owned the book. The author immediately realized that it was too late to evade further discussion by handing over the question to a librarian actually employed by the library. Resigned to that reality, he pointed out that the library tried to meet the reading needs of all members of its inclusive community. He then pointed out that she had the option of telling her daughter not to borrow such books.

Obviously frustrated by the answer, the woman pointed out that she had been given the same response when raising an earlier concern. She then stressed that her daughter liked to go to the library with her friends after school. That meant her daughter could read that book and others like it at the library, and she would never know about the reading.

“I am a single mother,” she pointed out. “Do I have to quit my job to go to this library to be with my child after school in order to make sure that she does not read the library’s pornography?”

The complaining mother looked at her watch and then informed the author that she had to get back to work.

Librarians who work public service desks know how badly complaining parents can receive even the most politely phrased “It’s your job as a parent to guide your child’s reading” statement. It often solves nothing. Unfortunately, it can be perceived as a negative response that seems to blame the parent for any perceived problems resulting from their child’s use of the library’s book collection. For some readers, it is only a slightly better response than “Why don’t you just go away?”

Calzada, Edwards, and Heindel in *Prepared Libraries, Empowered Teams* (2024) have recently provided a first-rate work with more reassuring ways of responding to book removal requests. Nevertheless, the fact remains that even their intensely planned process can frustrate a complaining library user when books perceived to be negative remain on the library’s shelves. Many such do not care how a book was acquired. They just want it gone. The restraints of *Prepared Libraries* in dealing with disputes that have gone public will be discussed later in this essay.

Recently, there took place what can be considered an episode of political irony for librarians pushing for parental responsibility for children’s reading. A bill was passed by the South Carolina legislature that included a section mandating public library support for parental choice. In order to receive state aid, South Carolina public libraries were instructed to “certify to the State library that their county libraries do not offer any books or materials that appeal to the prurient interest of children under the age of seventeen in children’s, youth, or teen book sections of libraries and are only made available with explicit parental consent” (South Carolina State Library 2024).

Although quite problematic for younger readers, in retrospect, this legislative action can be considered an almost inevitable conservative state approach to supporting parental rights with their children’s public library use. When public librarians do not respond as demanded to parental concerns, a state may be pressured to do so. If in doubt, readers working in institutions with a library attorney might ask about the legal basis for such action in their own state. The response might be disconcerting for a number of progressive librarians. Among other things, “although censorship violates the First Amendment right to freedom of speech, some limitations are constitutionally permissible. The courts have told public officials at all levels that they may take community standards into account when deciding whether materials are obscene or pornographic and thus subject to censor” (Webb 2024).

## Advice from a State Legislator

Following his years as a consultant with a southern state’s library administrative agency, the author took a position heading a library cooperative located in an almost equally conservative Midwestern state. Within a year, he was also chairing a joint librarian-trustee state legislative committee. During one trip to the state capitol for a committee meeting, he met again for lunch with a local state legislator and discussed the committee’s legislative agenda. As he had several times before, the legislator stressed that, at the time, public libraries were positively viewed by his Democratic and Republican colleagues. Consequently, they might be

able to preserve some of the library taxing authority that the powerful Republican Speaker of the House was seeking to take away.

“If you have the votes, you can even fight the Speaker and win. If you don’t have the votes, try to negotiate. You may have something he wants.”

Readers who wish to learn about a past time when conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats united in support of public libraries are invited to read the author’s 1994 *Public Libraries* article “Library Lobbying as a Way of Life.” It really is not fiction. While it may be inspirational to read about past library victories, accounts of public library legal actions in the current culture war are more likely to involve tales of increasing state control over collections, local book bans, and the loss of library jobs.

## The Problem

This essay seeks to further the discussion of how public librarians in conservative or mixed-ideology communities can preserve the greatest amount of inclusion in collections, programs, and staffing without engaging in unsuccessful public disputes. It is thereby hoped that a more negotiated approach will limit the loss of progressive librarian jobs; the hiring of more conservative, even professionally unqualified, replacements; and the removal of books and programs deemed to be offensive by some community members. Since such actions are much less likely to take place in progressive communities, discussion of matters will be limited to conservative or mixed-ideology localities. Nevertheless, it is understood that problems affecting progressive libraries are more likely to relate to disputes over public library budgets (New York City Council 2024).

While it is beyond the specific aims of this consideration, it should be recalled that attacks on public libraries have been an inevitable part of US culture. They did not suddenly arise in reaction to the presence of progressive librarianship in local public libraries. As stressed by the political scientist Jacob Sutherland,

Public libraries in the United States have historically been sites of political contestation. From early efforts to contest using local taxes to fund libraries, to grassroots movements to expand library services to rural communities, to efforts to ban books uplifting minority voices, public libraries have always been political institutions with duality: they provide community services while remaining venues for controversy. (Sutherland 2024)

Being both providers of respected community services and ongoing sources of controversy has made any general statements regarding defending progressive public library programs more than a bit problematic. Conditions supporting or opposing such defense will simply vary by locality.

## Defining the Conditions of Libraries in the Current Culture War

### **Distrust of Institutions**

Jacob Harold of the Urban Institute has identified four major critiques relevant to the growing distrust of American institutions. These include the Justice Critique, held by those

who have been and are yet exploited; the Managerial Critique, asserting that institutions have become ineffective; the Populist Critique, stressing the aims of dominating elites; and the Decadence Critique, identifying organizations that have abandoned their originating aims to become self-serving.

A review of the literature would indicate that the Populist Critique seems to best capture the motivations of many library protestors. With relevant adjustments, Harold's observations about the Populist Critique can be narrowed to the problematic perception of public libraries. For some conservative protestors, their local public libraries are "led by elites. Those elites [professional librarians] use institutions as vehicles to impose their agenda upon the rest of society. These organizations [public libraries] become weapons that magnify the power (particularly the cultural power) of a small subset of the population" (Harold 2024, 5).

Here, it is worth knowing that conservative America is divided. Traditional mainstream conservatives can even be concerned about the negative direction of present-day populism. Published in the conservative *Deseret News*, Michael Kofoed's "Perspective: Is Populism Worth the Soul of Conservatism?" warned that "populism seeks to divide the 'people' from the 'elites' — never mind that the people elect the elites. *Since small 'l' liberal democracy won't give the populist what he wants when he wants it, then grievance and victimhood must replace prudence and moderation*"[emphasis added] (Kofoed 2022). Here, several points are worth highlighting. First, while this observation was an opinion, the *Deseret News* is ultimately owned by the religiously conservative Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, often termed Mormons. Second, even communities in conflict may have conservatives who are concerned about a public library's operations but are willing to discuss them in a negotiation context.

The above-cited Populist Critique can summarize the perceptions of many library protestors regarding library collections and programs. Their outrage can be complicated by the reality of librarian employment. As is often the case, librarians, particularly directors, may not be native to the communities they serve. In consequence, their ideological opponents may see their progressive management of public libraries as an unwanted imposition by outsiders. While facts should be important in discussions of library and other community matters, it is often perceptions, frequently in error, that can be the basis for action (Smith 2019).

## **Challenges for Librarian Professionalism**

Too often, disputes over library services take place in a context where the backgrounds of the matters involved are not considered. This often results in a lack of understanding that can complicate searches for a common basis of understanding that can be of benefit in problem-solving (Community Tool Box n.d.).

## **Relevant Library History**

At times, an objective consideration of the development of American public libraries requires going beyond the library literature. In this context, research on public libraries in the economics discipline supports the reality that the developing American public library was, in part, an institution devoted to education, civic engagement, and morality. Analysis by Kevane and Sundstrom concluded that in the 1880–1929 period, "public libraries were often local initiatives and reflected a variety of local conditions. But the public library movement was enabled and supported by state legislation and organizations. Library boosters hoped these efforts would increase the establishment of libraries and thereby spread their purported salutary influence on education, civic engagement, and morals" [emphasis added] (Kevane and Sundstrom 2016, 17).

The roles of the twenty-first-century public library in supporting contemporary education, perhaps termed lifelong learning, as well as civic engagement, will vary by library and may be locally disputed. However, it is now being argued that library education trains future public librarians to view a commitment to moral development as a service negative.

In a 2025 article entitled “Are Librarians Being Trained as the New Culture Warriors?” published in the conservative *Public Square Magazine*, Krista Cook asserted that

Librarians’ elevation of “free speech” and “privacy” over their other obligations seems to have severed their perceived obligations to those who pay their salaries and provide their buildings and the materials they circulate. They seem to feel they have no obligation to taxpayers or the standards that exist in their communities. Their commitment to free speech and privacy supersedes these obligations.

Unanswerable to law enforcement, governing entities, and the communities they serve, librarians act as if they exist on a higher plane and are a law unto themselves. This subtle shift in loyalties has enormous consequences. (Cook 2025)

Dr. Cook’s four degrees include an MLIS from an ALA-accredited program. Her admittedly well-constructed article clearly seeks to transform her individual perceptions into a national indictment of what she sees as the results of the problematic education provided to future public and other librarians. Clearly more than a compilation of attack slogans, Cook’s perceptions can be expected to be used, in part, as the basis for local critiques by educated conservatives on the problematic mental framework of their professional librarians. As a result, the reader is encouraged to read Cook’s attack on the profession in any calculated risk analysis (see below) of possible threats to progressive library services and programs.

In this context, the innovative Illinois effort to use tax funds to encourage inclusive public and school library collections through the use of library state aid (Nanos 2023) has also been attacked as immoral in another critique from the right. Writing in the conservative *National Review*, Scott Howard (2023) stressed that Illinois was forcing its libraries to act immorally:

As the community depository of literary wisdom, public libraries definitionally convey public moral standards. To suggest, as Illinois has done, that the community has no right to set such standards is to suggest that there is *no standard at all* (emphasis in original).

This is preposterous. Not only should these libraries be permitted to select which books they have on their shelves... it is right and good for them to do so on moral grounds. These libraries are places for the public to learn and think. The moral standards of the bookshelves the libraries contain are both instructive to and reflective of the public. (Howard 2023)

Wayne A. Wiegand, perhaps the foremost historian of the American public library in the last half-century, found a number of engagements, not always positive, with public libraries by those advancing their own moral standards (Wiegand 2015). In his *Part of Our*

*Lives: A People's History of the American Public Library*, Wiegand stressed something that might not be emphasized in studies for the MLIS degree. Simply stated, for most of the history of US public libraries, there existed a widespread collaborative reality involving the development of library collections and services in the nation's smaller cities and towns. In this context, the obligation of professional librarians was not to impose on their communities a professionally approved menu of library programs and services. Instead, their role was to educate community members concerning the value of a strong and inclusive range of library resources, programs, and material, preferably delivered by staff whose ranks were knowledgeable of the needs and interests of their community's population. Such an aim was not always achieved, with the mid-twentieth-century reality of segregated public libraries being the most negative example (EveryLibrary 2020).

To the extent that the library as a community educator system worked, it tended to involve an ongoing mix of formal and informal discussions by library personnel with members of the local community. The result was often supported as a worthy expenditure of tax money. In this process, the librarians negotiated "a community's acceptable literary boundaries" (Wiegand 2015, 168).

This process of librarians using their professionalism to instruct and educate community members was not considered censorship. Instead, it was a means for developing responsive services that coexisted with less directive interpretations of the 1939 and later versions of the Library Bill of Rights. In recent decades, this collaborative process was gradually replaced in many professional mindsets by prescriptions offered by ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF) and its long-serving Director Judith Krug. Over time, partly through the education for the ALA-accredited master's degree negatively critiqued by Cook (2025), joint decision-making was replaced by the librarians' prescription on what had to be done. In short, it was no longer professionally acceptable for librarians to educate local residents during discussions on the best library services and, following such exchanges, live with the results. Instead, regardless of their community's dominant beliefs, library collections and services were to be developed and used according to ALA requirements (Wiegand 2015).

In these new limitations on what was acceptably professional, library directors, boards, and staff were now expected to adhere to Krug's emphasis on fighting all limitations in service. Although Krug could not be held solely responsible for the result, it is arguable that the groundwork for the contemporary hardline ALA stance (reprinted below) reflects her own professional philosophy. Unfortunately, adherence by librarians to ALA's requirements for professionalism now seems to be the root cause of many of the firings of progressive librarians and the resultant hiring of their more conservative replacements.

It is now the case, according to ALA, that

Libraries and their governing bodies have a legal and professional obligation to ensure that all members of the communities they serve have free and equitable access to a diverse range of library resources and services that is inclusive, regardless of content, approach, or format. *[This principle of library service applies equally to all users, minors as well as adults]. Lack of access to information can be harmful to minors. Libraries and their governing bodies must uphold this principle in order to provide adequate and effective service to minors [emphasis added].* (American Library Association updated 2019)

It is not the reality that all public librarians in conservative communities are committed to defending, for example, purchasing certain controversial children's books and keeping them in the children's room or even in the library. Given this reality, this analysis will borrow relevant theory to examine the possible nature of the public librarians who were and are willing to put their careers on the line for total youth access to library collections and programs.

### **Self-Sacrificing Librarians**

In 2018, Fobazi Ettarh published an influential article entitled "Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves" in which she addressed how librarians developed an ethic of self-sacrifice which she termed "vocational awe." When analyzed, Ettarh has supplied a theoretical approach that uniquely describes why librarians, for example, would sacrifice their jobs and livelihood over the placement of challenged children's books in their libraries.

As described by Ettarh,

"Vocational awe" refers to the set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that result in beliefs that libraries as institutions are inherently good and sacred, and therefore beyond critique. . . . I would like to dismantle the idea that librarianship is a sacred calling; thus requiring absolute obedience to a prescribed set of rules and behaviors, regardless of any negative effect on librarians' own lives. (Ettarh 2018)

In the midst of this increasing disputation over library collections and programs, it has been argued that librarians forced to violate ALA standards are increasingly suffering from "moral injury." This affliction has been defined as "the phenomenon whereby a person experiences a strong negative cognitive and emotional response after enduring exposure to a traumatic situation that violates their ethical values" (Hazelton-Boyle and Hazelton-Boyle 2023, 4). Moral injury for public librarians facing challenges to professional standards is seen as causing depression and anxiety, as well as causing librarians to leave the profession (Hazelton-Boyle and Hazelton-Boyle 2023, 6).

## **When Complaints About the Library Become Public Disputes**

### **A Lack of Effective Guidance**

As a philosophical pragmatist, the author believes it is necessary to deal "with a problem in a sensible way that suits the conditions that really exist, rather than following fixed theories, ideas, or rules." In consequence, this involves undertaking "an approach to problems and situations that is based on practical solutions" (*Cambridge English Dictionary* n.d.). It needs to be conceded that "practical" is a word that can have a number of meanings, few of which involve getting oneself fired. As one library director informed the author, those opposed to a fully inclusive library collection in her conservative community had secured enough support from municipal and other political leaders that she did not dare follow ALA's instructions. As a result, purchasing and shelving a number of the often-protested children's and young adult works in the children's and YA sections of her library, endorsed by the few leading progressive residents of her locality, seemed to her to be professionally suicidal.

At the time the director spoke with the author, she was investigating whether or not purchasing the works and placing them in the adult stacks might somehow be acceptable to both the community's conservatives and progressives alike. For her and this author, taking ALA-required actions would seemingly lead to her dismissal as director, which was neither sensible nor a practical solution for solving a problem in collection development. It might well be the cause of a severe case of moral injury even, and if fired as progressive director, she would go on to win a significant lawsuit. Almost certainly, it would mean that the director would be replaced by a more conservative librarian who would have no problem placing further restrictions on challenged works even if they were ordered.

It is an unfortunate reality that the conservative solution to library problems for populist objectors can often be firing the director who supervised the library. Along with replacing the library board that authorized the library's progressive efforts, it is a faux solution that needs to be avoided if possible. In this context, given the rise in library litigation, the principal source for advice on censorship issues should be the public library's attorney. If at all competent, this lawyer ought to be familiar with state library laws, applicable municipal ordinances, and local social and political contexts.

Ultimately, "all politics is local" (American Bar Association Governmental Affairs Office 2016), and local circumstances can and will vary. It is particularly the case where library protest is on the edge of becoming part of a populist conservative political platform. However, the sage advice contained in *Prepared Libraries, Empowered Teams*, as well as other useful sources (Harvard University Gutman Library 2024), may be less effective when populist conservatives control local politics. It is especially the case when data can be marshaled by protestors to demonstrate that the public library is staffed by progressives spreading a progressive agenda while discriminating against a conservative counterpart (Terr 2023).

### **When Communication Does Not Work and Library Support Is Lacking**

By definition, the public library functions as a government agency, regardless of the laws under which it is created (New York State Library 2023). In consequence, it is useful to examine the research on independent public agencies for ideas regarding what determines their public support. In this context, a recent study by Rimkutė and Mazepus endorsed long-standing public administration understanding that "both expertise and reputation-based authority bases are crucial in shaping the perceived legitimacy of government agencies among citizens" (2025). In short, perceived professional expertise needs to be associated with a positive public perception of public agencies, a category that includes public libraries, to secure positive local backing.

On the surface, it appears that librarians, with parents at least, are overwhelmingly recognized for their collection expertise and enjoy a fine reputation on a national level (EveryLibrary Institute 2023). Nonetheless, "traditional-values groups are demanding the removal or restriction of books with explicit sex education, and books that unflinchingly document LGBTQ realities and the Black American experience" (Burnett 2022). Although helpful in raising issues, generalized research is seldom conclusive on a local basis since a public library's reputation, a notoriously fact-resistant perception, simply varies in a given municipality, state, or region. The result, in areas where the public library is distrusted, can be a roadblock difficult to remove.

Summarized in the work of Rimkutė and Mazepus is a fundamentally important finding regarding perceptions of institutional legitimacy:

The impact of agency reputation on citizens' perceptions of legitimacy is asymmetric: A positive bureaucratic reputation does not notably affect legitimacy, while a negative reputation undermines it significantly. This suggests that government agencies should prioritize managing reputational threats to prevent legitimacy loss in the eyes of citizens." (Rimkutė and Mazepus 2025)

To restate this finding in a library context, whenever a public library's collections and services are successfully attacked, it is likely that the library has lost the perceptual backing of critical elements of its service community. In consequence, prior to such conflict, public libraries should work on reinforcing their community reputations if they want to ensure their place as a valuable part of their municipalities or counties. Facts should not be overlooked when making the case for public library value. However, there seem to be times when the distribution of facts about the library should take second place to the management of perceptions of the library. This actuality reflects a basic human reality recounted by Adrian Bardon (2020):

A human being's very sense of self is intimately tied up with his or her identity group's status and beliefs. Unsurprisingly, then, people respond automatically and defensively to information that threatens their ideological worldview. We respond with rationalization and selective assessment of evidence—that is, we engage in “confirmation bias,” giving credit to expert testimony we like and finding reasons to reject the rest. (Bardon 2020)

The very different ideological worldviews of progressive librarians and conservative protestors underscore the need for librarians to consistently work to enhance their community reputations prior to and during protests over collections and services. Facts can reinforce the commitment of a library's supporters. They are considerably less likely to change the perceptions of the library being held by protestors.

## Planning, Calculated Risk, and Compromise

Public libraries in progressive localities often enjoy the ability to operate in full observance of the many progressive standards promulgated by the American Library Association. However, in conservative and mixed-ideology communities, there are often indicators that emerging or growing protests may lead to a reality where library staff are unable to defend the full spectrum of ALA-endorsed intellectual freedoms. In such circumstances, open conflict may lead to staff firings, the winnowing of inclusive library collections, and the loss of valued public programs. In 2024, this was reported as a situation where “librarians around the country are struggling to reconcile their desire to serve their communities with their need for self-preservation, especially as libraries have become hubs for social services and battlegrounds for the culture wars” (Schinsky 2024).

Even in the midst of a culture war, it may be possible for a library in a conservative locality that is only slightly red to promote progressive library collections and services. The

positively polite *Prepared Libraries, Empowered Teams* (Calzada, Edwards, Heindel 2024) is likely to be of use in such circumstances. If reacted to in time, and protestors are not dismissed as mere irritants, it may be possible to negotiate an acceptable response to the critical question: “Is there any hope that cultural communities [in conflict] can achieve a sufficient degree of coherence so that the claims they make on each other can lend themselves to compromise-making?” (Gerber 2020, 15).

Although public libraries should undertake studies of their service communities on an ongoing basis, the need to acquire local knowledge in the midst of a national or local culture war, or when such a conflict looms on the horizon, is critical. In the midst of political and social disturbances, there arises one dominating imperative. It becomes essential for public libraries serving conservative communities not to insist on total adherence to progressive library standards endorsed by ALA unless they are favored locally. It thus becomes necessary to determine the level of such support. To that end, the librarians’ understanding of the valuable planning tool of calculated risk becomes an imperative.

### **Calculated Risk**

Calculated risk is a military and business term that seeks to make the best possible choices in a given set of circumstances. The reasons for such calculations are generally well known but worth restating.

According to Bernhardt (2020),

Decision-makers cannot make a decision without some degree of risk. This is true because no one has complete information. If a decision-maker had complete information, the necessity for a decision-maker would cease to exist. With complete information, one could simply implement decision rules, which identify decisions with the greatest expected value. However, we live in a world of bounded rationality, meaning that we must make decisions based on what we know and what we do not know. Since no one can accurately foretell the future, uncertainty exists as a critical variable to rational decision making. (Bernhardt 2020, xiii)

It is worth noting that the American Library Association, in the conditions thus described, would expect librarians to defend public library collections and programs on the basis of its standards. On reflection, these can be seen as seemingly very close to Bernhardt’s automatic “decision rules.” As such, they can be self-defeating in serving municipalities and counties dominated by conservatives.

For its part, “calculated risk,” as described in the business context, is “about making informed decisions that align with organizational goals while considering potential outcomes. It involves a detailed evaluation of the risks involved, including financial implications, market conditions, and operational impacts. This approach ensures that decisions are not only bold but also backed by data and strategic insight.” (Rauch 2024)

It is necessary to stress that in the matter of maintaining the highest possible level of progressive library services and programs, it may be necessary to negotiate compromises. This is becoming increasingly difficult, due in large part to the multiple effects of social networking on firming up group beliefs and identities.

As stressed by Colin M. Fisher,

Humans are biased in how they evaluate information. People are more likely to trust and remember information from their in-group — those who share their identities — while distrusting information from perceived out-groups. This bias leads to echo chambers, where like-minded people reinforce shared beliefs, regardless of accuracy. (Fisher 2025)

Although the American Library Association is seemingly against negotiating anything less than full library compliance with its standards (Wiegand 2015), there are times when the alternative to negotiation may be open conflicts that the public library may not win.

### **The Value of Negotiation**

Plamen Ralchev (2023) has summarized the value of negotiation for the Center for Conflict Research in a particularly useful way:

Negotiations are a process of communication aimed at reaching a joint decision on an issue that was initially associated with incompatible interests. In negotiations, there are at least two parties who communicate with each other on issues that are of interest to both parties. The following objectives can be set in the negotiation process:

- reaching a mutual agreement on the issue in which their interests clash;
- overcoming confrontation, which inevitably arises due to conflicting interests, without destroying the relationship.

To achieve this, we must be able to:

- establish interpersonal interaction;
- manage our emotions. (Ralchev 2023)

The commendable approaches (team building, planning, developing a resolution mindset, etc.) outlined in *Prepared Libraries, Empowered Teams* (Calzada, Edwards, Heindel 2024) are particularly helpful in low-level discussions seeking to prevent minor complaints by local library stakeholders from escalating into major disputes. They are likely to be most successful in progressive communities. However, the matter may be very different in conservative or mixed-ideology communities when the public library and its supporters lack the political and social backing to win arguments for totally supporting ALA's inclusive standards. In less progressive communities, legal actions defending such standards can be successful, but a public dispute may poison library-community relations for a considerable period of time. In consequence, the less incendiary option of formal discussions with the philosophical opposition might prevent small local disputes over library collections and services from escalating into job-threatening power plays.

When the director and board of trustees open the public library to potential negotiation in order to save staff jobs and the greatest possible level of progressive services, several realities will become clear. First, while many library staff and board members may have been

involved in negotiating salaries and home purchases, they may not have been included in negotiating the future of an entire community's library services. Under such circumstances, it may be best to bring in an outside facilitator.

As stressed by Crowley (2023b),

Even short of a crisis, public library representatives and protestors may be at loggerheads and are unable to come to an agreement over matters such as suitable children's books, videos, and programs, as well as the proper roles of parents and librarians. In order to avoid decisions based solely on power differentials, which may not favor the library, it might be effective to bring in a neutral facilitator to assist the disputants in coming to the least objectionable solution. (Crowley 2023b, 14)

There is yet another bit of irony in setting up discussions that might lead to a public library reluctantly negotiating some limitations on its services. ALA has published a particularly relevant explanation of what meeting facilitators can help achieve in negotiations. Its *Leading Conversations in Small and Rural Libraries: Facilitation Guide* (2020) should be used as a valuable source to understand the likely duties of a neutral facilitator in leading discussions (2020).

Additionally, although *The Librarian's Guide to Negotiation: Winning Strategies for the Digital Age* (Ashmore, Grogg, and Weddle 2012) has been around for over a decade and brings thoughtful concepts to discussions, it was published before the more recent intensification of the current culture war and must be used with that reality in mind. Elsewhere, there is a fundamental issue with many of the articles in the contemporary library and information professional journals dealing with fights over intellectual freedom. They are understandably so grounded in ALA's progressive and commendable worldview that they offer little help for negotiations with opponents when such negotiations may result in less than full compliance with ALA's standards. Although more likely due to availability than for any other reason, recent publications of the author, written in response to pleas for help from public library directors and managers, have been downloaded hundreds of times (Crowley 2021; Crowley 2023a; Crowley 2023b; Crowley 2023c).

### **Calculated Risk Again**

The author first learned the value of a calculated risk approach when he took the position of administrator of a multitype library cooperative in a Midwestern state. After he arrived, the cooperative's vice president, who was also the chair of the planning committee, told the author that he needed to prepare three budgets for use because of the uncertainty of the federal and state dollars that supported the cooperative. The first budget was the public budget adopted by the cooperative's board of directors. The other two budgets were to be kept secret and made public only if the cooperative lost either its state or federal support. Unfortunately, since the cooperative's budget went primarily to support its staff, losing funding from either source would result in layoffs. The knowledge that the administrator was preparing for just such a possible outcome would result in plummeting staff morale.

This realization of financial vulnerability for his organization led the author to increase his commitment to library lobbying and the larger area of advocacy. After spending his first months on the job traveling around the state, teaching librarians and trustees how to lobby, he

continued his advocacy work while administering the cooperative and its services. Eventually, he chaired the state-level librarian and trustee legislative committee and assumed the role of Federal Relations Coordinator.

In the process of legislative work, the author learned a crucial aspect of library advocacy. Under no circumstances should libraries personally attack protestors. Under the less irritating heading of “opposition research,” developing such attacks could involve finding out negative facts about library protestors, a process that tends to emphasize an “opponent’s ideological inconsistencies or reveal a more salacious personal indiscretion” (MasterClass 2021). While it might be emotionally satisfying to respond in kind to vicious attacks on library staff, it would be self-defeating to do so. A library where the staff was known to attack on the same level as its most vicious opponents would undermine its very positive perceptions as the workplace of that “really nice children’s librarian.”

## Conclusion

The author clearly prefers following the guidance of the legislator who advised librarians to “Fight if you can win. Otherwise, negotiate” over approaches more likely to lead to librarian martyrdom. Nonetheless, he is well aware that the circumstances of individual public libraries, including responses to attacks, can and will differ. In the past, while working full-time in public information at the New York Public Library (NYPL), the author also studied part-time for his library master’s degree at Columbia University. There, he had the privilege of taking a course in library administration taught by John Mackenzie Cory, the NYPL director. Once, after the author sat in on an interview on censorship with Cory by a local reporter, the director took the time for an out-of-class talk. He shared with the author a situation where the library had been attacked for years after it refused to censor communist and other radical material. To borrow the words of Stephen Francoeur, in the mid-twentieth century, NYPL’s “employees found themselves embroiled in battles with self-proclaimed ‘100% loyal Americans’ eager to remove materials they deemed subversive” (Francoeur 2022, 2).

Although he did not mention it to the author at the time, Cory, who was a self-described “extremist” in defending the Library Bill of Rights, went along with a general library position that it needed to avoid promoting its communist holdings.

As summarized by Francoeur,

While the library was more than happy to accept into its collections all sorts of controversial material, it did not go out of its way to tell the world about such items. Although some of its staff members were particularly outspoken about defending intellectual freedom, they hesitated in having the institution needlessly become a lightning rod in an era where the political atmosphere was highly charged. (Francoeur 2011, 19)

In recounting the NYPL story to conclude this essay, the author is not advocating censorship, the differential treatment of what some populist conservatives might consider controversial library materials or programs. Instead, the reader is being asked to recall that not all public libraries have the luxury of being in progressive communities. At times, even a library in progressive New York City can handle certain works differently out of self-protection. Instead, as stressed throughout this essay, when library political power and alliances are insuf-

ficient to win a censorship dispute, there will be times when negotiating for the most inclusive range of collections and services is a necessity. It should never be a preference but only the result of a calculated risk analysis based on thorough community knowledge. Fighting and losing a battle that an appropriate calculation of risk deems to be unwinnable is an approach that is more likely to cost librarian jobs and minimize collection and program inclusivity.

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