

Library Censorship As a Health and Safety Issue

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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the connection of library diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) with the management obligation to safeguard the health and safety of library staff and users. It focuses on two primary audiences. The first consists of the faculty of library and information science (LIS) educating students for public libraries and other positions. The second includes the library directors, staff, and trustees responsible for public library service in progressive, mixed philosophy, or conservative municipalities, counties, and states. A rationale and processes for bridging local variations of the progressive-conservative divide are provided. Throughout, the maximum feasible level of DEI collections and services and the minimization of attacks on public libraries and library staff are emphasized.

Threats, Job Losses, and Strategies for Enhancing Library DEI In Conservative Contexts

In an extended practitioner career prior to teaching and researching, the author once had to deal with a staff member carrying a loaded gun who understandably frightened other staff. The incident caused much psychological harm but no physical injury. It resembled some of the serious threats described in Cooke's "How Book-Banning Campaigns Have Changed the Lives and Education of Librarians – They Now Need to Learn How to Plan for Safety and Legally Protect Themselves" (Cooke 2023).

As summarized by Cooke

Neither policies nor book reviews nor professional expertise are keeping library workers from being called pedophiles, groomers, indoctrinators and pornographers. They are being harassed, receiving death threats and being fired. Libraries have been sued and library workers are so threatened and harassed that they are getting sick and leaving their careers. (Cooke 2023).

One might hope that such slurs and crimes are being appropriately investigated. Nonetheless, as stressed by Knox, "despite libraries' efforts to stay abreast of evolving societal trends, insufficient adaptation to safeguard both employees and visitors against emerging risks has been evident. Absent substantial reforms, the trajectory of this issue foretells a worsening scenario" (Knox 2024).

Where funds are available, social workers are being employed in public libraries. These professionals handle many health and safety problems brought into the building by users as an alternative to calling the police (PLA 2021). However, sworn officers would still be necessary with active-shooters, bomb threats, and other dangers to life (Public 2024; Quinton 2024).

The American Public Library World

Public libraries come in all sizes with differential funding for collections and services, as well as staff and user health and safety. As related by Elizabeth Fox, her rural state has “some very, very small libraries. Many libraries are rooms in the county courthouse or somewhere else. They don’t have their own buildings, so they don’t have large collections” (Limbong 2025). They may also lack resources to address health and safety concerns.

Personal Identity, COVID, and Other Challenges

Personal identity issues seemingly lie at the heart of the current culture war. “Identity – including race, sexual orientation, gender – have become lightning rod subjects of hundreds of bills in state legislatures across the country as Americans across the political spectrum seek to define the nation’s values” (Alfonseca 2023).

COVID-era video instruction made some parents angered at the progressive education their children were receiving (Robinson-Shah 2024). Whatever the cause or causes, disputes over diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) have intensified, often making it more difficult for various local residents to work and live together. Jonathan Haidt has encapsulated the fundamental problems with such disconnection, “liberals and conservatives are bound around different sacred principles, and they absolutely cannot understand each other. They are forbidden from understanding each other, lest they be kicked out of their tribe” (Knowledge at Wharton Staff 2013). Attempting to live inclusively can be hard work and “it’s easier to surround ourselves with people who always agree with us” (McWilliams 2022).

Physical and Other Attacks

Physical attacks on library staff are more common in the contemporary world (Urban Libraries Council n.d.). Moreover, even when attacks on DEI-influenced public library collections and services are verbal or online, the result can be traumatic. Library personnel suffering a traumatic episode at work have been advised,

First and foremost: create a safety plan when you are not in the midst of a trauma response that lists where you feel safe. This can include places and people. It might offer ideas for what you can do if you’re in a space where you feel unsafe—for example, if you’re at the reference desk, your safety plan might involve asking another staff member to cover for you while you go to your car to sit and breathe for 15 minutes. If you’re on social media, it might mean setting your account to private and logging out for a period of time. (Jensen 2024)

In these and other circumstances, the library director usually has the responsibility to ensure the greatest possible support for the health and safety of library personnel and users.

Directors Acting to Protect the Health and Safety of Staff and Users

For discussion purposes, a simplified definition of causes for many contemporary disputes over public library collections and programs can be useful. Burnett asserts, “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). Moreover, the undocumented can be added to the list.

Cooke’s (2023) recounting of the inventory of negative physical and mental realities that faculty need to convey to students in their teaching has already been highlighted. For these and other reasons, contemporary library managers should regularly “check in with staff on their well-being and stress levels” (PressReader Team 2024).

In public libraries, the library director often has the primary responsibility to “engage with the community to build a culture of respect and safety for the library environment” (PressReader 2024). This can be challenging for progressive Democratic library directors in Republican-dominated conservative locales. *Governing* has summarized the difficulties of seeking to reach across political boundaries, “the two parties at this point represent people of separate and distinct ideologies, economic and educational backgrounds, cultural and religious values, attitudes toward science and higher education, and ideas about gender, race and identity. Given all this, maybe it’s not surprising that American politics have become polarized and toxic” (Greenblatt 2020).

Progressive public library directors often need strong political skills to advance DEI in conservative states, counties, and municipalities. Such skills necessitate an understanding of the perceptions of both opponents and supporters.

As Nancy Isenberg emphasizes,

“Make America Great Again” tapped the anxieties of all who resented government for handing over the country to supposedly less deserving classes: new immigrants, protesting African-Americans, lazy welfare freeloaders, and Obamacare recipients asking for handouts. Angry Trump supporters were convinced government entitlement programs were allowing some to advance past more deserving (white, native-born) Americans. This is how many came to feel “disinherited.” (Isenberg 2016, p. xxii).

In the author’s view, both Isenberg’s *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America*. and *The 1619 Project* (Hannah-Jones et. al 2021) should be required reading for contemporary library directors. It is particularly essential for those serving rural white populations or urban communities with rural migrants and underserved minorities as residents.

Building a Culture of Safety In a Library's Conservative Community

Legal Authority in a Public Library

Public library policies are legal actions with potential consequences. Accordingly, as stressed by the Indiana State Library, "it is suggested that your library attorney review your final policies before adoption. It is further suggested that policies be reviewed on a set cycle, as required by law, and as necessary to address current situations" (Indiana 2021). Such "current situations" can now include attacks on the library and staff for DEI efforts (Jensen 2024).

The author is not an attorney but was advised by several assistant attorneys general in conservative states that legal mandates impacting public libraries have a descending order of authority. It starts with U.S. and state constitutions and moves downward through federal and state laws, municipal or county ordinances, board approved public library policies, and, finally, professional standards not otherwise incorporated into relevant library law or policy. Expert guidance from library associations that has not been so reinforced is simply advice and not a requirement.

The complicated process of making the library safer for library staff and users will first be addressed at the building level. There, the critically important charge of building "a culture of respect and safety" for library staff and users can be a significant challenge. It is particularly so for those unable or unwilling to interact with conservatives to achieve progressive ends.

Staff and User Safety at the Building Level

An Escaped Lawbreaker in the Library

Years ago, a lawbreaker serving an extended prison sentence escaped custody while being treated at a hospital located in the state capital. Seeking an initial form of identification, he went first to the state library to apply for a library card. He was informed that if he returned with some form of documentation the staff would be happy to do so. At that denial, he immediately left and was soon recaptured.

When the library staff who had interacted with the lawbreaker learned about his escape, they realized how easily they could be attacked at work. Quite upset, they demanded the state library be made safer. The library's administrators immediately contacted the police unit responsible for preventing and solving crimes in state owned or rented buildings. The author then walked with a lieutenant to identify areas where the state library, freely open to the public, could be made safer. It was similar to the process the author has occasionally recommended to public libraries in high crime communities.

The lieutenant's report to the state librarian included the recommendation that there be only one public entrance to the stacks. In addition, all users should be required to show identification before being allowed to enter the stack area. Since the state library then shared a multi-story building with other units of government, the security assigned to the structure as a whole was asked to provide a more regular presence.

The new restrictions on access did not result in professional librarians and other staff protesting over such limits on the public's access to information. Instead, there was general satisfaction that the state library had addressed a previously unforeseen cause of heightened anxiety.

The Culture War and Reducing Attacks on Public Libraries and Their Staff

A 2022 study by Comito and Zabriski found that urban library workers suffered “racist and sexist verbal abuse, harassment, physical assault including having guns and other weapons brandished, and drug and alcohol issues including overdoses” (Albanese 2022). Preferably, students seeking master’s degrees accredited by the American Library Association should be taught these realities, even as they learn how to transform the public library into a more comprehensive DEI entity (Cooke 2023).

After graduation, new U.S. alums may encounter conservatives who perceive DEI changes as abandoning neutrality and the U.S. public library’s originating purposes (Kurtz 2022). At times, the reactions of such protestors can be threatening (Gruver 2023). It is also an issue in Canada (Zoledziowski et. al. 2024).

Library staff are not the only public service personnel attacked by those with a grievance. A recent *Governing* article aimed at state and local employees stressed, “threats and harassment are on the rise, but strategies exist to bring down the temperature and reduce the likelihood of deadly outcomes” (Smith 2025). Advice for greater safety made in the article by Tina Barton of the Committee for Safe and Secure Elections includes

- “The most important thing is to have protocols and rules and follow them.”
- “Wear required lanyards [visible identification].”
- “Don’t prop open doors that require a key card.”
- “Don’t place screens or photos of family members where a member of the public can see them easily.”
- “Don’t work late alone; have a buddy who can escort you when you leave.”
- Request greater police support. “Officers on the beat can take extra measures such as passing checks [on foot or from patrol cars].” (Smith 2025)

Library directors who have good relations with local police are able to work out a process for greater security with the officer assigned to community relations (Community Relations n.d.). Planning should be a priority and involve the local police department, members of the public, library staff and a pre-meeting reading of Albrecht’s “Puzzled About the Police Response in Your Library? Perhaps a Better Understanding of Their Unique Culture Will Help” (2021).

Collaborating with police can be productive of greater staff and user safety. Unfortunately, a stronger police presence in the library can be problematic for those whose culture has suffered police abuse. It remains the unfortunate case that “accounts of violence against library workers and patrons have been accompanied by several stories of security and police overreach” (Robinson 2019).

As Zare reminds,

In recent years, high-profile police use-of-force encounters with individuals of color (e.g., George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota; Breonna Taylor in Louisville, Kentucky; Jacob Blake in Kenosha, Wisconsin) have increased the long-standing scrutiny of law enforcement actions and deepened the mistrust between communities and police when police behave inappropriately. (Zare 2024, 384)

One means of limiting negative perceptions would be for full or part-time security workers, including police, to be trained at library expense on public library realities. To minimize local concerns, such training could include a modernized, all-age adaptation of the “Officer Friendly” approach that once helped advance police-community relations in schools (Gear 2016). Ideally, such training could be developed at the state or local level with substantial input from underrepresented groups, the community at large, and law enforcement.

Attacks on the Public Library

A Divided Conservative Opposition

For the most part, a good many progressives are familiar with the detailed, erroneous, and harmful executive order issued against DEI in January 2025 by President Trump aimed at “terminating radical DEI preferencing in federal contracting and directing federal agencies to relentlessly combat private sector discrimination” (White House 2025). More thoughtful conservatives may oppose DEI for reasons their community may deem tolerable or even sensible. Writing in the conservative *Deseret News*, Eric Schulzke summarized various perceptions of DEI using explanatory language instead of the attack version so often found in other presidential and other conservative accounts. As perceptions, such assessments can be resistant to factual rebuttals (Taylor 2019).

Depending on your perspective, the acronym DEI may sound personal and inviting, bureaucratic and statistical, or ideological and accusatory. It may be primarily about race and ethnicity — or it may be about much more: gender, gender orientation, gender identity and sometimes even disabilities. It can give confidence or breed resentment. (Schulzke 2025).

In this listing of the various perceptions of DEI, it is likely that progressives will select the positive assertions, such as “personal and inviting,” and giving “confidence” while conservatives will chose “bureaucratic and statistical, or ideological and accusatory” and breeding “resentment” as more reflective of their views.

Easy Sociology, a component of the Sociology of Ideology, has offered the following explanation for conservative resistance to progressive pressures, “conservatives fear that abrupt changes, especially those imposed by the state or driven by ideology, risk eroding the foundational elements of society” (Easy Sociology 2024).

Conservative beliefs can vary. The Pew Research Center (2022) has identified four ring categories of U.S. conservatives. Mostly Republican oriented, these categories include Faith and Flag Conservatives, Committed Conservatives. Populist Right, and Ambivalent Right (Pew 2022). In this context, “it’s important to remember that, on many issues, there is likely to be a spectrum of opinion – people will support or oppose the issue in varying degrees. It’s helpful here to be aware of the full spectrum, to see the whole landscape of community opinion, to know who stands where” (Community 2025).

There are several benefits for advancing DEI through greater knowledge of your opponents. It can “force you to refine your arguments, your message, and your strategy in order to put yourself in the strongest possible position” (Community 2025.). It is an ongoing approach that can be termed “pragmatic progressive” (LeTourneau 2015).

Changing (A Little) Perceptions of the Public Library by Talking with Conservatives

Health and Safety at the Building Level

In 2022 ALA called “on community leaders and elected officials” help safeguard libraries, staff, and users (ALA 2022). Prior to interacting with such “leaders and officials” library personnel and supporters should follow the sage advice of the Canadian Urban Libraries Council and “identify the big picture outcomes that are provoking you to reflect on safety and security – What are your goals and objectives? What outcomes are you aiming to achieve?” (Canadian 2025)

In an age of greater protest, often accompanied by threats, many sources advise public libraries to undertake variations of the following,

Library staff require training on how to respond to protest situations professionally and legally. This includes understanding when to contact law enforcement, how to document incidents, and methods for de-escalating tensions while maintaining neutrality. Staff should be familiar with institutional policies regarding protesters, media representatives, and general public access during contentious periods. (Gardella 2025).

To an extent, small public libraries sharing a building with other municipal services have many decisions on matters of library security made for them by the agency controlling the structure. Additional protection for library personnel and users may require action by a city or town council.

Using Politically Acceptable Language with DEI

Form and Content of the Library DEI Message

Attacks on librarians over progressive efforts often involve negative responses to the acronym DEI and the words it represents. It is thus helpful to consider an observation from communications, “many media scholars have claimed that form is just as important, if not more so, than content” (Myers 2019.). Should experience demonstrate that the form of the DEI message actually works against the message content, it is reasonable to change the language for progressive communication. According to the organization Spitfire, this is exactly the situation that currently exists with much of DEI (Spitfire n.d.).

In an effort to provide an alternative for reaching “persuadable” audiences, Spitfire developed a pamphlet entitled *Shift Terms, Not Values: Reaching Persuadable Audiences on Diversity, Equity & Inclusion in Higher Education*. Mainly oriented towards the academic world, the work (a) presents the DEI message in non-DEI terminology and (b) is useful for public and other libraries. To this end, Spitfire stresses, “this messaging is designed to move persuadable audiences only. It will not work to move the strong opposition that we define as nonpersuadable” (Spitfire n.d. p.3).

The progressive advice provided by Spitfire ranges from identifying persuadable recipients of a rephrased DEI message to justifications for change, tested messages, and “dos and

don'ts." Public library staff and supporters who have discovered that their current DEI message is being perceived negatively, and even alienating those who might otherwise be sympathetic, are likely to find the Spitfire advice to be particularly useful.

According to Spitfire, there are a number of viable recipients of the message of *Shift Terms, Not Values* (below). The author has indicted which categories are of particular value to the public library community.

- State policymakers who are moderate or moderately conservative — not staunch opponents leading the weaponization of this work
- State policymakers in politically difficult climates who are facing attacks on diversity, equity and inclusion efforts in higher education [in public libraries] and who may be tempted to support legislation that limits diversity, equity and inclusion due to fear of political or legal retaliation or to protect other interests
- Administrators, faculty and staff in institutions of higher education [elected or appointed community leaders] who are moderate or moderately conservative — not staunch opponents leading the weaponization of this work
- Administrators, faculty and staff at institutions of higher education [public library boards, directors, and staff] who work in politically difficult climates that are facing consistent attacks on diversity, equity and inclusion efforts and need to make the case to maintain their work
- Business leaders and other potential supporters of diversity, equity and inclusion efforts in higher education [local public libraries] who may withdraw prior support or remain on the sidelines due to fear of financial, political or legal retaliation or to protect other interests. (Spitfire n.d. p. 3)

When advancing DEI by not using diversity, equity, and inclusion terminology in community discussions of progressive public library services, it is an important to keep in mind “when you are communicating to persuadable audiences outside of the base, you shift your language but never your values” (Spitfire n.d. p.3)

When Minorities and Rural Whiles Came Together for Mutual Benefit

A Texas Story

While not a public library tale, the following is a reminder that the politically astute, even in a conservative state, can sometimes achieve a DEI-like benefit.

In 1997, the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that that race could not be used when admitting students to public higher education in three states, which included Texas, over which it had jurisdiction. With minority enrollment set to plummet, a Latina Texas legislator led a coalition of minority and rural white legislators to narrowly secure a law that

Required each public university in the state to automatically admit any students who graduated in the top 10% of their graduating classes. The policy exploited the existing racial and ethnic segregation of Texas public high schools, allowing universities to accept students from different areas of the state and a wider array of schools without explicitly considering students' race (McGee 2023).

Since bright students from poorly supported high schools could select any of the state-supported institutions, the more prestigious University of Texas at Austin became crowded with bright youngsters from poor minority and white communities. Students from wealthy suburbs were negatively affected. University administrators and the financially well-off saw this as a problem and the 10% level was reduced at Austin. Nonetheless, the basic ten percent plan otherwise remains in place to the benefit of smart minorities and rural whites graduating from poorly financed schools (McGee 2023).

The lesson of this Texas story is quite simple. In building support, DEI advocates should find areas of mutual benefit, build coalitions, and use language that appeals to coalition participants (Gross 2009).

What Is to Come?

MLIS Education, DEI, and Staff Health and Safety

As stressed by Cooke (2023), library and information students need instruction in surviving in the unfortunate new normal in conservative states and localities. In developing and teaching approaches to advancing DEI and staff and user health and safety, it has been argued that “LIS programs bear the largest responsibility for closing the gap between education and practice in public librarianship. Without innovation in higher education, the public librarian will always remain two steps behind in a world that is always three steps ahead. Solutions are within reach, and curricula developers must look beyond tradition to discover them” (Carmack 2019, p. 13).

Public Library Practice

Securing the health and safety of public library staff and users is absolutely essential in any efforts to expand services for previously underserved local populations. For many staff and users in Red or conservative communities, progress in diverse, equitable, and inclusive (however locally termed) staffing, collections, and services is likely to be a challenge for years to come. Reluctantly but pragmatically, it becomes essential to ponder the following from Zwerman and Schwartz’s “How ‘Good’ Social Movements Can Triumph over ‘Bad’ Ones” (2021).

Persistence—sustaining commitment, perhaps over the course of a lifetime; expanding networks while forming and reforming coalitions; assessing failures and devising new strategies; exploiting new political opportunities with fresh tactical repertoires; and integrating new generations into the life of the movement—is key to assuring further moments of success. (Zwerman & Schwartz 2021)

“Moments of success” can come where enough voters, and influencers, including persuadable conservatives, see a benefit for their own identity communities. For their part, library supporters will need to be committed to the often hard work involved.

Recently, the progressive lobbying group EveryLibrary reported on a growing recognition of the value of progressives collaborating with conservative groups.

Recognizing a "Conservative Partner Gap" is crucial because, even with a strong civil rights or civil liberties coalition, it is important to engage legitimate conservative or libertarian organizations that can provide principled, values-based support rooted in civil society issues like local control and opposition to government overreach. This also includes faith-based coalition partners. This gap can render coalition efforts politically lopsided, which could undermine credibility with lawmakers who might otherwise be persuaded by arguments related to freedom of speech, small government, or parental autonomy. (EveryLibrary 2025 p. 22).

In 2020, the conservative think tank American Enterprise Institute (AEI) published Michael J. Petrilli's "When It Comes to Education, Conservatives Should Stand for Excellence." While progressives are unlikely to subscribe to all conservative plans for education, the third key point in Petrilli's opinion piece should resonate with much that public libraries have been doing over recent decades—"Our responsibility as conservatives is to stand up for excellence and widen its availability to many more of America's children" (Petrilli 2020).

In the event that federal support lapses, it is well to remind both well-to-do or middle class conservatives of the public library's fine past work in advancing education in local communities.

These include

- a. securing funds, whether federal and/or local donations in money or fast-food for the meals that feed hungry underprivileged children lunch and/or breakfast, this allowing them to grow intellectually in summer reading or learning programs (Collaborative n.d.)
- b. raising dollars to support Teacher in the Library programs to help kids whose families lack the money for private tutoring and need help making progress with their homework and learning (Chicago n.d.) or
- c. providing support for home-schooled students and parents of varied races, backgrounds, and beliefs (Dankowski, 2024).

Many public librarians have made the case for addressing crucial educational needs of children as a benefit for all their community. Such efforts have generally followed the political rule of not attacking current and potential supporters for past sins of omission and commission. Those capable of being persuaded to help the public library respond positively to community needs ought to be encouraged and not attacked. Here, a rereading of Spitfire's *Shift Terms, Not Values* can be most beneficial for the public library community in the challenging work that lies ahead.

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Author

Bill Crowley has worked in New York, Alabama, Indiana, and Ohio public, state, and cooperative libraries and library organizations as everything from part-time clerk to public relations consultant, administrator of public services and deputy state librarian. He is currently a professor with Dominican University in Illinois. As of this writing Bill authored fifty-eight (58) articles/book chapters and two books, while editing a third. He has a BA in history, an MS in library service, an MA in English (with a folklore thesis) and a PhD in higher education (with a dissertation on the research university library).