

Citation Please: Executive Orders, DEI, and the Fight for Intellectual Freedom

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ABSTRACT

This scholarship examines the ethical and professional implications of recent executive orders that directly affect the library and information science (LIS) field, particularly as they intersect with diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, intellectual freedom, and cognitive liberty. While DEI training is intended to advance justice, representation, and accessibility, critics argue that mandates may infringe upon individual belief systems and privacy of thought. At the same time, federal restrictions on DEI and related cultural programs threaten the LIS profession's long-standing commitment to inclusivity, neutrality, and equitable access to information. Through the lens of Antelman's (2025) assertion on cognitive liberty and using legislative data on anti-DEI and anti-CRT measures, Johnson situates the LIS profession at a critical crossroads. Executive actions dismantling federal support for libraries, restricting cultural narratives, and curtailing public broadcasting create a chilling effect that undermines the library's role as a neutral space for democratic engagement. The cumulative impact represents a dual erosion: ideological conformity imposed through policy, and structural disempowerment through defunding and censorship. The article argues that LIS professionals must confront these challenges by reaffirming the profession's ethical commitments while advocating for approaches that safeguard both inclusivity and intellectual freedom. Rather than framing DEI and intellectual freedom as opposing principles, the article calls for a pluralistic stance that honors individual rights and collective responsibility. In doing so, libraries can continue to serve as resilient spaces of inquiry, access, and representation in an increasingly polarized sociopolitical landscape.

In a time of increasing political polarization, it is crucial for both students and professionals to engage with ideas they may not initially agree with. As I often tell students, no scholar turns away from challenging or opposing viewpoints. We do not consume information merely to argue against it, but to understand its foundations, test our assumptions, and refine our own positions. True scholarship requires intellectual humility, a willingness to "ingest" ideas and examine them critically through the lens of verified sources and peer-reviewed contributions. Moreover, it is equally important to consider the source and the citations it draws upon. Emotional reactions may be tempered, and thoughtful insight gained, when we pause to ask not just *what* is being said, but *who* is saying it, *why*, and *how* they are substantiating

it. Let this piece serve as a reminder: Always check the source, not only to protect truth but also to strengthen the integrity of your own scholarship. You may find yourself less offended.

“Smart people don’t like me.”
– Donald J. Trump, US President 45 & 47

Let us examine the impact of executive orders on the library and information science (LIS) profession’s values and morals as it relates to this statement:

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) training, as it has been approached in recent years, impinges on privacy of thought and cognitive liberty . . . The right not to have one’s belief interfered with without their consent is cognitive liberty. (Antelman 2025, 430)

This statement sums up her article and raises a beyond urgent ethical dilemma for the LIS profession, which historically champions both intellectual freedom and social justice—at least on the surface level, and boldly by various groups of professionals belonging to the field. The executive orders that have mandated or restricted certain types of DEI training create conflicting obligations for library workers, particularly when those mandates infringe upon personal belief systems or demand the disclosure of ideological positions. In such cases, the moral fabric of the LIS profession—again built on the pillars of neutrality, privacy, and intellectual freedom—can become compromised. For instance, if an executive order prohibits certain types of DEI content deemed divisive, it could curtail libraries’ ability to provide inclusive services or educational programming, while also putting LIS professionals in a position where they must choose between compliance and their own ethical convictions. Conversely, if a DEI training mandate obligates individuals to disclose personal beliefs or undergo ideological “re-education,” it can indeed infringe on the right to cognitive liberty and freedom of conscience, as Antelman (2025) suggests.

Let us be clear, the tension here is not between DEI and intellectual freedom *per se*, but in how policies (particularly those codified through executive action) affect the balance between professional ethics and personal autonomy. DEI initiatives are intended to cultivate a more just and equitable society, aligning with many LIS values such as accessibility, community engagement, and representation. However, when these initiatives are implemented through rigid, top-down (federal to local) mandates that disregard individual agency or suppress dissenting thought, they may undermine the very principles they aim to uphold. Antelman’s (2025) critique invites a more nuanced discussion on how DEI training can coexist with the profession’s enduring commitment to intellectual freedom. It is not about eliminating such training, but about ensuring that it remains voluntary, dialogic, and reflective of the diversity of thought within the profession itself.

Thus, in evaluating the effects of executive orders on LIS values, it is essential to distinguish between policy intent and implementation. LIS professionals must engage critically with the implications of these directives, whether they are perceived as supporting or hindering DEI goals, and advocate for approaches that safeguard both inclusivity and individual rights. The LIS profession must resist binary thinking that frames DEI and intellectual freedom as mutually exclusive. Instead, we must strive to uphold a pluralistic ethical stance that respects the varied identities, experiences, and belief systems of library workers and the communities

they serve (representation and inclusion). In doing so, LIS can successfully model a path forward that honors its mission and legacy of promoting access to information while adapting to the complexities of an evolving, highly sociopolitical landscape.

Using UCLA School of Law's *CRT Forward* for tracking anti-critical race theory legislation, Robinson (2025) highlights that as of April 2025, a growing number of states have implemented legislative and policy measures aimed at restricting or eliminating pedagogy and discussion of concepts related to critical race theory (CRT) and DEI. Specifically, twenty-nine states have adopted anti-CRT measures, with South Dakota (12), Texas (16), and Florida (27) leading the nation in the volume of such legislative actions. These measures often limit how race, history, and systemic inequality can be discussed in K–12 and higher education settings and have had a chilling effect on educators and cultural institutions across the country.

There has been an exponential hike in legislation aimed at curtailing DEI initiatives. According to *The Chronicle of Higher Education's* DEI Legislation Tracker, as of early 2025, a total of 134 anti-DEI bills have been introduced across twenty-nine states and in Congress. Of these, a total of 26 have received final legislative approval, 23 have been enacted into law, and 86 have either failed, been tabled, or been vetoed (Chronicle Staff 2025). Such a legislative push reflects a coordinated movement to dismantle DEI programs in public universities, state agencies, and cultural institutions. In addition, the nation has seen a dramatic surge in book censorship efforts. The American Library Association's (ALA) Office of Intellectual Freedom tracked more than 800 attempts to censor library materials and services, with 2,452 unique book titles targeted for removal or restriction (American Library Association 2025). Often, these bans disproportionately affect books written by or about people of color, LGBTQ+ individuals, and other historically marginalized groups, thereby undermining intellectual freedom and inclusive representation in public and school libraries (American Library Association 2023).

As noted by Chrastka (2025), cultural institutions serve as spaces of inquiry, refuge, and connection, and the Trump administration's 2025 executive orders seek to replace plurality with conformity. It is essential to assess how recent executive orders under the current administration intensify these challenges. Antelman's (2025) assertion that current DEI approaches may infringe on the cognitive liberty and privacy of thought of library workers must be understood within the broader socio-political context shaped by federal mandates that aim to redefine the ideological landscape of publicly funded institutions. Executive Orders 13985, 14238, 14253, and 14290 represent a coordinated shift away from pluralism and inclusivity in public discourse, directly affecting LIS core values: intellectual freedom, access, and equity.

Executive Order 13985, “Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing,” abolishes federal diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives under the guise of cost-cutting and anti-radicalism. This eliminates DEI funding, hiring, training, and outreach across federal agencies and partners. For libraries, this calls for reduced access to grants from entities like the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH); special funding for those serving marginalized communities. Examples could include programming such as bilingual literacy, multicultural events, and inclusive efforts in collection development. The order claims these efforts are “preferential” and thus should be defunded. Yet, libraries are meant to reduce information injustice. Without the support for such DEI practices, services, and training, libraries risk becoming homogenized institutions unable to meet the mission of service to all.

Executive Order 14238, “Continuing the Reduction of the Federal Bureaucracy,” is aimed at dismantling the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the only federal agency solely dedicated to supporting libraries and museums. It funds a variety of programming in all types of libraries and LIS critical thinking initiatives, such as broadband expansion, digitization projects, accessibility initiatives, and staff development. This, perhaps, poses the most existential threat. Without this impactful agency, libraries of all economic scales will stall progress in access and could even revert to outdated, exclusionary service models. This isn’t just about ideology or content control; it is about the survival of the public knowledge infrastructure. It represents yet another challenge to LIS values of neutrality, access to diverse perspectives, and truth-seeking. With consideration of Antelman’s (2025) concerns about cognitive liberty, this is a mirror in institutional terms where libraries are being forced into ideological conformity, undermining their role as neutral spaces for information exchange.

Executive Order 14253, “Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History,” mandates federally funded cultural institutions—including the National Museum of African American History and Culture, the Smithsonian Institution (museums, education, and research centers), the National Archives, and even the National Zoo—to revise or remove materials deemed “improper” or “politically motivated.” While libraries are not directly named, the implications are a direct blow and severe. Libraries often partner with institutions like the Smithsonian and National Archives for exhibitions and educational content. If these institutions are policed and required to censor materials on the unfavorable legacy of America’s history (systemic racism, gender inequality, or Indigenous rights), libraries lose access to vital resources that support a truthful, inclusive historical record. As Anderson (2024) argues, libraries must resist politically driven content suppression to maintain intellectual freedom. Yet, this executive order forces libraries into a moral dilemma: comply with government-censored narratives or risk funding and partnerships. Again, it compromises core LIS values like neutrality, access, and truth-seeking. Antelman (2025) describes this as an institutional erosion of “cognitive liberty,” where libraries are pressured into ideological conformity.

Executive Order 14290, “Ending Taxpayer Subsidization of Biased Media,” eliminates federal funding for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), cutting libraries off from PBS Kids, NPR historical content, and public documentaries. These resources are especially vital in underserved and rural areas where free, high-quality educational media supports early literacy and lifelong learning. Access to such educational resources could change lives, even generations, aiding in uprooting poverty. The loss of CPB-backed programming undermines equitable access and deepens cultural and digital divides, particularly among low-income families. Libraries cannot be truly “neutral” and must actively uphold intellectual freedom by resisting efforts to suppress or censor content based on political agendas. As Bertot et al. (2016) emphasize, avoiding difficult or controversial materials in the name of neutrality ultimately undermines the library’s core mission to provide open access to diverse perspectives.

Conclusion

Cumulatively, the four executive orders briefed represent a forced convergence of ideological control and structural disempowerment. Together, the executive orders constitute a systemic effort to centralize ideological control while weakening the institutional independence of libraries. On the one hand, federal mandates dictate what historical and cultural narratives are permissible, and on the other, they strip the funding that enables libraries to serve diverse populations. As Antelman (2025) warns, freedom of thought must include the

right to form and express beliefs without coercion. In a library context, this extends not only to workers but to patrons. However, when executive policy dictates which beliefs are acceptable and restricts access to contested or diverse perspectives, the library ceases to be a sanctuary of intellectual freedom. Instead, it becomes an instrument of ideological gatekeeping. One cannot deny that this creates a chilling effect across our nation, calling for an actionable resolution for the LIS field.

WHEREAS libraries may preemptively self-censor or limit services to avoid scrutiny or punishment;

WHEREAS the erosion of both cognitive and institutional liberty places LIS professionals in ethically untenable positions;

WHEREAS the government calls for restoring trust in public institutions and promoting civic engagement, yet increased politicization and external pressures have compromised libraries' ability to serve as neutral, trusted spaces for democratic discourse;

WHEREAS emphasis is placed on expanding educational and economic opportunity, efforts to restrict access to information in libraries directly undermine these goals, disproportionately harming marginalized communities who rely most on free public access to knowledge and resources;

THEREFORE, the LIS profession must confront these executive actions with both ethical clarity and relentless advocacy, with the American Library Association (ALA) reaffirming its commitment to the Library Bill of Rights.

As federal backing recedes, informational and cultural institutions must employ ways to sustain inclusive services through community partnerships, philanthropic funding, and local government support. Antelman's (2025) insights compel LIS professionals to critically evaluate not just the content of DEI initiatives, but also the mechanisms by which they are implemented or suppressed. DEI is not an ideal, but rather a reality of the need to consider all of humanity. The question is not whether DEI or intellectual freedom should prevail, but more so how they can coexist in ways that honor both individual rights and collective responsibility. Unfortunately, these executive orders demonstrate that failing to protect one inevitably undermines the other.

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