

Intellectual freedom and the academic library

Entering the next century with strength

by Steven Herb

As part of the 100th anniversary issue of *Library Journal* in 1976, Eli Oboler wrote a piece entitled "The Free Mind: Intellectual Freedom's Perils and Prospects."

Reprinted in his book *Defending Intellectual Freedom: The Library and the Censor*, Oboler thought the article still served as "a reminder to experienced librarians and a stimulus to library neophytes to engage, personally and directly, in the necessary battle to save intellectual freedom. After several years, about the only additions I believe needed are to underscore its perhaps prescient comments on the inchoate dangers to libraries in the commercial information industry and once again to ask vehemently for strong measures by the library profession to prevent the spreading contagion of censorship [whether conscious or unconscious] by librarians themselves."¹

Twenty years later, it is interesting to note that the two largest items on the Intellectual Freedom Committee's very full agenda this autumn have been an examination of the potentially deleterious effects of commercial outsourcing on intellectual freedom principles in libraries and the ongoing debate regarding filters and the Internet—a battle that is being waged within libraries and among librarians as often as it is outside the profession.

It seems a good time indeed for ACRL to have adopted and approved its "Intellectual Freedom Principles for Academic Libraries." Oboler, with the help of Zechariah Chafee Jr., presents three simple truths that provide a solid foundation for the ACRL document and which "those who believe in the bright future of the free exercise of the free mind should find agreeable":²

- there is no good reason to assume that the free flow of ideas and argument will *not* result in a better life for the individual and nation;
- those few who advocate suppression, restriction, and censorship are in no way so much wiser than the masses that they can safely regulate their views for them; and
- contrary to the "virtues of tradition and the obvious evils of change" argument, let us have enough faith in our institutions to believe that they can safely withstand voice and paper (and Web site!).³

The "Intellectual Freedom Principles for Academic Libraries" arrive at a time when temptations to restrict or tighten control of access to information loom large in many academic settings. The surprise may be that the effort to restrict access to information is as likely to come from a pressured library administrator as a system administrator or university official outside of the library.

About the author

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Intellectual Freedom Principles for Academic Libraries

A strong intellectual freedom perspective is critical to the development of academic library collections and services that dispassionately meet the education and research needs of a college or university community. The purpose of this statement is to provide an interpretation of general intellectual freedom principles in an academic library setting and, in the process, raise consciousness of the intellectual freedom context within which academic librarians work. These principles should be reflected in all relevant library policy documents.

1. The general principles set forth in the Library Bill of Rights form an indispensable framework for building collections, services, and policies that serve the entire academic community.

2. The privacy of library users is and must be inviolable. Policies should be in place that maintain confidentiality of library borrowing records and of other information relating to personal use of library information and services.

3. The development of library collections in support of an institution's instruction and research programs should transcend the personal values of the selector. In the interests of research and learning, it is essential that collections contain materials representing a variety of perspectives on subjects that may be considered controversial.

4. Preservation and replacement efforts should ensure that balance in library materials is maintained and that controversial materials are not removed from the collections through theft, loss, mutilation, or normal wear and tear. There should be alertness to efforts by special interest groups to bias a collection through systematic theft or mutilation.

5. Licensing agreements should be consistent with the Library Bill of Rights, and should maximize access.

6. Open and unfiltered access to the Internet should be conveniently available to the academic community in a college or university library. Content filtering devices and content-based restrictions are a contradiction of the academic library mission to further research and learning through exposure to the broadest possible range of

ideas and information. Such restrictions are a fundamental violation of intellectual freedom in academic libraries.

7. Freedom of information and of creative expression should be reflected in library exhibits and in all relevant library policy documents.

8. Library meeting rooms, research carrels, exhibit spaces, and other facilities should be available to the academic community regardless of research being pursued or subject being discussed. Any restrictions made necessary because of limited availability of space should be based on need, as reflected in library policy, rather than on content of research or discussion.

9. Whenever possible, library services should be available without charge in order to encourage inquiry. Where charges are necessary, a free or low-cost alternative (e.g., downloading to disk rather than printing) should be available when possible.

10. A service philosophy should be promoted that affords equal access to information for all in the academic community with no discrimination on the basis of race, values, gender, sexual orientation, cultural or ethnic background, physical or learning disability, economic status, religious beliefs, or views.

11. A procedure ensuring due process should be in place to deal with requests by those within and outside the academic community for removal or addition of library resources, exhibits, or services.

12. It is recommended that this statement of principle be endorsed by appropriate institutional governing bodies, including the faculty senate or similar instrument of faculty governance.

—Adopted by ACRL Intellectual Freedom Committee: June 28, 1999. Approved by ACRL Board of Directors: June 29, 1999.

Members of the 1998–98 ACRL IFC were Chair, Laurence A. Miller, e-mail: millerl@servms.fiu.edu; Karen Bacsanyi, Wayne State University; Susan Brynteson, University of Delaware; Jennifer S. Burr, Nazareth College of Rochester; Jack Forman, Mesa College; M. Charlotte Hess, Workshop in Political Theory Policy Analysis; Keith W. Russell, National Agricultural Library; Marty Stilwell, Kellogg Community College; and ACRL staff liaison Michael Godow. ■

The concerns that administrators express are usually genuine and important to acknowledge when constructing or reconstructing academic library policies regarding collections and services.

In the Internet arena alone, pressure to restrict access to computer-based resources may be coming from a variety of sources and situations—from the college administration's concern that the library's computers are the last bastion of unauthenticated access on campus to the library staff members who are becoming more vocal about the images or words they occasionally witness with regret.

The document approved by the ACRL Board this past June should provide a solid rock upon which to build any collections-based or service-driven policy. It is broad, fair, and well connected to both the intellectual freedom tenets of all libraries and the special academic freedom underpinnings of college and research libraries.

As the 12th principle of the document states, "It is recommended that this statement of principle be endorsed by appropriate institutional governing bodies, including the faculty senate or similar instrument of faculty governance."⁴

On the way to that endorsement, it is probably wise to examine one's existing policies for self-compliance. Many libraries are re-examining their mission statements regarding service populations in light of the changes the Internet has wrought. When two different populations are competing for limited computer resources, for example, how does a library provide equitable service when one of the populations is from the college and the other is from the town?

Academic libraries are also revisiting the issues of anonymity and privacy as defined by access to computer resources. The days of a truly anonymous in-house library user may be coming to an end in the electronic age, but it is critical that the privacy protections in place for borrowing library materials be scrupulously observed for patrons using resources requiring authentication.

Whether you are planning your century-closing party next month or lamenting the triumph of popular culture over simple calendar mathematics, it is a very appropriate time for academic libraries to revisit their collections and service policies. Those libraries that examine and adjust their policies in the light of the "Intellectual Freedom Principles of for Academic Libraries" will face the next century from a position of resounding strength.

Notes

1. Eli M. Oboler, *Defending Intellectual Freedom: The Library and the Censor* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Pr., 1980): 3. Original article appeared in *Library Journal*, January 1, 1976.

2. *Ibid.*, 4.

3. *Ibid.*, 4. Bullets 2 and 3 incorporate quotes from Zechariah Chafee Jr., cited as part of Oboler's original text from Zechariah Chafee Jr., *The Inquiring Mind* (New York: Da Capo Pr., 1974; Reprint of 1928 Edition): 30.

4. Intellectual Freedom Principles for Academic Libraries, Association of College and Research Libraries, American Library Association, 1999. <http://www.ala.org/acrl/principles.html> (11 Oct. 1999). ■

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