

# How Policies Portray Students: A Discourse Analysis of Codes of Conduct in Academic Libraries

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In academic libraries, “codes of conduct” are policies that define what people who use those libraries are allowed to do in library spaces and serve as rules for enforcement. In this policy discourse analysis, the author examines these policies to understand what dominant discourses emerge about students who use libraries. The discourses represented in these policies portray students through frames of deficit thinking, adultism, exclusion, and surveillance. The study advocates for a critical shift in the design and purpose of these policies, and the results may inspire academic librarians to revise their policies to center care and respect for students.

## Introduction and Problem Statement

Many academic libraries create policies governing the use of their spaces, often referred to as “library codes of conduct,” “library use policies,” or “library community standards.”<sup>1</sup> These documents communicate the organization’s expectations of how people behave and interact in the public library spaces, and they define what people are allowed to do when using the library.<sup>2</sup> While codes of conduct in academic libraries may have a practical internal purpose of documentation, they also may have an external impact on how people experience the library, and they should not fall beyond critique and reflection. These policies will be particularly important as academic libraries continue to “reopen” from the global pandemic. Library workers will need to effectively manage their public spaces and strive to ensure the collective safety and well-being of their users.

This policy discourse analysis investigates the following question: What dominant discourses about students are represented in policies governing the use of academic library spaces (codes of conduct) at flagship state universities? The study seeks to interrogate the priorities and approaches described in these codes of conduct. Ultimately, the outcomes of this research should inspire the critical review of academic library codes of conduct and encourage library workers to consider alternative, justice-focused, discourse narratives in future revisions of these policies. The work may help to guide academic library policymakers to develop policies that support equitable experiences and demonstrate care for their students, especially those most marginalized by predominantly white, academic spaces. The study may also help

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library workers, who are charged with implementing policies, examine the application and impact of codes of conduct.

## Literature Review

Academic libraries often sit at or near the center of university or college campuses and remain one of the most heavily used buildings.<sup>3</sup> They offer learning spaces that provide resources and services to support students (and others) using their buildings to work and learn. Library buildings are important services, in and of themselves, that require strategy, management, and maintenance.<sup>4</sup> In many cases, library spaces may matter more to students who have been marginalized by academic culture.<sup>5</sup> Some students may not have access to productive study spaces at home or the ability to purchase required course materials or technology.<sup>6</sup> As libraries begin to fully reopen following the spring 2020 closures from the COVID-19 pandemic, thoughtful efforts about the equitable management of these learning spaces will be paramount for the students who need them most.<sup>7</sup>

Libraries can be complicated and confusing buildings for students, but library decision-makers have long attempted to make better decisions about how space is configured and managed by working to understand the needs and behaviors of the people, especially students, who use their spaces.<sup>8</sup> Library and Information Science programs often include coursework in usability methods for systems and human-centered design that may inform the approaches that new librarians bring to their practice when they enter the field.<sup>9</sup> Many libraries have teams or positions dedicated to gathering and analyzing user data through practices like participatory design, service design, and user-centered design to make student-centered decisions about library spaces.<sup>10</sup> These efforts aim to make libraries more useful and accessible, and this user-centered approach should extend to how library workers create policies for their spaces.

While libraries aspire to be free, open, and inclusive organizations, historical examples of how they have operated in ways that reinforce inequities are common, and policies are no exception.<sup>11</sup> The American Library Association's (ALA) list of the Core Values of Librarianship, which is meant to inform and guide professional practice, identifies values that professionals should uphold such as diversity, public good, and social responsibility.<sup>12</sup> In practice, however, these values often come into conflict with one another and may be weighted differently in their implementation or outright ignored. There is an inherent tension between efforts to protect intellectual freedom, a core tenant of librarianship, when the views expressed by someone threaten, harass, or marginalize a group of people, and the profession as a whole has not fully grappled with how to address these incompatibilities.<sup>13</sup> Further, while the stated values of the profession champion "equal" access as core to its collective mission, practices have at times resulted in the production of problematic, toxic, and inequitable spaces that center white, middle-class norms and "other" anyone who falls outside of those norms.<sup>14</sup> In 2018, the Office of Intellectual Freedom (OIF) in the American Library Association hastily pushed through a new recommended meeting room policy for libraries that specifically called for the protection of the rights of hate groups to use these spaces, a position antithetical to the values of social responsibility and diversity.<sup>15</sup> In their recent article critiquing the American Library Association's actions around the meeting room policy, Seale and Mirza highlight how the profession's focus on individual rights works to reinforce systematic and structural inequities by failing to acknowledge how power and privilege grant these protections to some at the expense of others.<sup>16</sup> ALA justified this move as championing free speech and expression,

even when ideas are disagreeable or offensive to others.<sup>17</sup> In this example, when weighing professional decisions about which tenets of the values of librarianship to uphold when in conflict with one another, library policymakers created a policy that prioritized benefit to the individual (intellectual freedom and free speech) at the expense of benefit to historically marginalized communities (social justice and responsibility).

### *Dominant Discourses*

A “discourse” is the language, thoughts, or images that produce meaning in communication, and a discourse becomes dominant when it gets reproduced through the common language, policies, structures, and practices used by a group.<sup>18</sup> Understanding a dominant discourse can provide important clues about a group’s social values. Policy discourse analysis, as a research method, works to uncover what are considered “problems” and what emerge as “solutions” in the text of policies through common and powerful sociopolitical representations, or dominant discourses.<sup>19</sup> Using the example of meeting room policies, the dominant discourse indicates that the problem is the curtailment of free speech and expression, and the solution is for libraries to provide space for controversial, hateful voices, even if doing so conflicts with other stated values.

Librarianship is a predominantly white and female profession, and scholars have associated its workforce’s stereotypes with the “Lady Bountiful” archetype or, rather, the icon of the white female as an agent for racial, moral, and civilizing projects that center whiteness. Interrogating this archetype, or discourse, allows contemporary librarians to critique the practices and representations that are symptomatic of this history.<sup>20</sup> Stereotypes of the profession construct a benevolent image of the nice, passive, and meek librarian that may operate to protect the status quo and shape some dominant discourses in the profession. If librarians assume that they operate in inherently good or kind ways, then their harmful behaviors, policies, or practices may be easier to overlook or feel beyond criticism. Fobazi Ettarh created the term “Vocational Awe,” which describes this phenomenon in the profession, and the resulting negative impacts, such as low salaries, burnout, and problems around hiring and retention.<sup>21</sup> Librarians may need to look closely at their own practices and question assumptions of neutrality to position their work to actively counter dominant narratives. This work will benefit the profession and its workplaces but also our impact on our communities where marginalized identities and voices have been left on the periphery of our collections, services, and spaces.<sup>22</sup>

Within the context of these priorities and critiques, academic libraries in the United States have continued to question and debate their role in remaining neutral spaces for all people when they exist on campuses that are facing increased acts of violence, discrimination, bullying, and intimidation.<sup>23</sup> Many professionals in the library field feel that libraries claim to be neutral information and service providers but are, in reality, reinforcing systems of inequity, bias, and oppression.<sup>24</sup> For example, Pagowsky and Wallace described creating a research guide about #BlackLivesMatter at the University of Arizona, and they explain that representing all perspectives, and thus ascribing recognition and value to all resources, on this guide would have caused the intended audience for the guide, students of color, harm. Further, neutrality aims to maintain a perception of balance and the status quo, which has historically benefited people who are white, male, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied, and middle class.<sup>25</sup> Further, De Jesus critiques neutrality in libraries not by the actions of individuals but through its con-

nection to institutional oppression—ideologically, historically, and structurally.<sup>26</sup> With the recognition that libraries cannot be neutral or without agenda, making intentional decisions about professional practice and advocacy is necessary.<sup>27</sup> A critical approach to policy development that centers social justice and the users' experience is necessary to counter forces that have long served to reinforce systematic oppression in library professional practice.

### *Policy Studies in Academic Libraries*

Several studies exist that examine various policies in academic libraries. For example, a study of art and architecture libraries identified trends in circulation policies, another analyzed the content of donation and gift policies in academic libraries, and another reviewed the availability and communication of mission statements in academic libraries who are members of the Association of Research Libraries.<sup>28</sup> By comparing access policies for building use with open access policies for content, Wilson et al. highlighted policy conflicts and the inconsistent attention to professional values in academic libraries, demonstrating the conflict between different policies within an institution. Other studies in libraries have both recommended and employed discourse analysis as a methodology, specifically for purposes of advancing equity and inclusion-focused agendas.<sup>29</sup> Examining values statements and initiatives from library professional associations, David Hudson presented an analysis of the dominant discourse around "diversity" as a concept in Library and Information Science to point to the ways that our collective approaches have produced few meaningful or measurable results moving the profession toward racial justice.<sup>30</sup> However, no studies have looked at the rhetoric of codes of conduct or library use policies in academic libraries nor have they used discourse analysis as a method applied to policies specifically.

In the field of education, researchers have used policy discourse analysis methods to interrogate the circular impact of the dominant discourses in higher education on policy development, language, implementation, and enforcement.<sup>31</sup> Similar to David Hudson's 2017 study,<sup>32</sup> Susan Iverson conducted a policy discourse analysis of 21 diversity action plans at land-grant universities to explore how the concept of "diversity" was represented. The author found that these policy statements watered down approaches to antiracism and resulted—however unintentionally—in reinforcing the status quo, with little impact on systematic inequities in education.<sup>33</sup> Bertrand et al. critiqued the rhetoric that state policymakers use to explain education achievement gaps and other inequities in relation to the discourse of deficit-thinking about students, or the perception that students from historically marginalized groups are either responsible for their own inequitable outcomes or inherently prone to failure.<sup>34</sup> An international study analyzed how anti-immigrant discourses manifest in US and European policies and impact practices in schools and community contexts.<sup>35</sup> Finally, a policy study revealed how narratives of the US Department of Education invoke the discourse of the "marketplace of ideas" and neoliberalism in their policies.<sup>36</sup> Beyond the field of education, policy discourse analysis translates well to the disciplinary context of library and information science, especially for studies that aim to highlight the insidious nature of how systems of inequities are reinforced or even created by policies.

### **Methods**

While traditional policy analyses may focus on evaluating the outcomes or effectiveness of a policy, policy discourse analysis draws from critical, feminist, and poststructural theories to

illuminate the dominant discourses that construct both policy problems and solutions. Dominant discourses both emerge from and are created by policies. They are illuminated through a close examination of the policy framework to reveal what is a *problem* and a *solution* to a problem. Traditional policy analysis may fail to consider the historical or social contexts that lend power to dominant discourses, and if not critiqued and intentionally resisted, dominant discourses may operate to perpetuate the problems they intend to address. In particular, the framework of policy discourse analysis emphasizes the importance of dominant discourses to explain why so many aims of a just society are slow to attain progress or are thwarted altogether.<sup>37</sup>

To investigate the research question, “What dominant discourses about students are represented in policies governing the use of academic library spaces (codes of conduct) at flagship state universities?” the author conducted a policy discourse analysis study by locating and reviewing any public-facing “codes of conduct” on library websites at flagship state universities.<sup>38</sup> Documents were identified for inclusion in this study by searching academic library websites for keywords like “library use policy” or “code of conduct.” If no documentation was found, the website’s organizational pages, often titled “About Us,” were reviewed to identify relevant library policies. Of the 50 flagship universities in the United States, 31 public-facing library codes of conduct were identified in this review, and all available documents were included in this study. Once this content was identified, each code of conduct document was saved as a PDF file, if available, or the text of the webpage was copied and pasted into a text document. Each code of conduct document was assigned an identifier in its file name. PDFs and text documents were then imported into NVivo software for data analysis.

Relying on Elizabeth Allan’s process for policy discourse analysis, the author analyzed the data through a phased approach (see table 1).<sup>39</sup>

<b>TABLE 1</b> <b>Policy Discourse Analysis Coding Framework</b>
<i>Phase 1:</i> Review of document characteristics and structure: title of the policy, availability of contact information, date of last update, inclusion of a preamble introducing the text, and length of the document
<i>Phase 2:</i> Documents read; initial coding completed for each document to capture the topics covered by the codes of conduct
<i>Phase 3:</i> Refined codes, developed early themes, and established a code book
<i>Phase 4:</i> Read all documents again to check for missed references and coding consistency
<i>Phase 5:</i> Organized codes to develop themes and identify dominant discourses

In phase 1, codes of conduct documents in the sample were each reviewed individually, and their texts were deductively coded based on the characteristics of the document structure. This initial review identified the title of the document, and whether a preamble, contact information, or the “last updated” date was included in the code of conduct. Next, in phase 2, each document was read again, and inductive codes were then marked to describe the topics and categories included in the content of a document and to begin to identify early themes. The author took care to identify inductive themes related to a document’s communicated purpose, priorities, and approaches; interesting or unusual examples; and other aspects that might be useful to examine in connection with the research questions for this study. If circulation policies



were included within a code of conduct, that content was excluded from review, as it is outside the scope of this investigation. In phase 3 of the analysis, nodes (term for codes in NVivo) were organized and refined to begin to identify thematic categories that emerged in the analysis across the documents. Nodes that had very few references were merged with similar ones, if appropriate, or removed if not connected to an emerging theme. Other nodes were divided into more granular codes, and some codes were renamed to clarify their meaning. These nodes were then used to develop a code book, which listed each node, its definition, a representative example of a reference to the node, early thematic categories, and any notes. In phase 4, all documents were read again to check for missed references and consistency in applying the final nodes. Finally, in phase 5, nodes were grouped into “parent” and “child” relationships in NVivo, and coded references were examined independently from the original documents. Nodes were grouped into thematic maps informed by the study’s research question and theoretical approach. The author also took care to identify what conduct was not covered in the nodes that may point toward intentional or unintentional “policy silences.” In addition, this analytical approach seeks to understand the problems identified in a policy and how those problems may misplace the source of the problem on the behavior of an individual rather than a system or structure derived from a specific historical or social context.<sup>40</sup> Throughout each phase, the author documented questions, emerging themes, and discussion points in research memos.

## Results

Of the documents reviewed in this study, 56 percent were titled “Code of Conduct” or some similar variation of the title that included the term “conduct” (18 of 32 titles; one document had two titles, though there are 31 documents in the study). Other unique titles are included in table 2. “Use” and “policy” were also used frequently in the titles.

**TABLE 2**  
**Other Document Titles without the Word “Conduct”**

About Using the Library
Building Use Policies
Community Standards
Disruptive Behavior and Inappropriate Use of Library Facilities
Expectations of Library Behavior
Library Building Use Policy
Library Use Policy
Patron Policies and Responsibilities
Policies and Procedures
Security Policy
University Libraries Rules and Regulations
University Library Access Policy

On average, documents were 3 pages and 884 words in length. One lengthy outlier was 12 pages long and included 3,744 words. Almost all of the documents (97%, or 30 of 31) included a preamble at the beginning of the document to explain its purpose. The tone of these preambles tended to be more aspirational and positive than the main body of the content, which,

as noted in the results and discussion below, tended to use more punitive and authoritarian language. Words commonly used in preambles included “productive,” “rights,” “services,” “support,” “safe,” and “learning.” Typical statements included commitments to “providing a safe, inclusive, and productive learning environment” or “a welcoming environment that is conducive to a variety of study needs” (see figure 1).

**FIGURE 1**  
Common Preamble Words



Of the 31 codes of conduct reviewed, only four documents (13%) included explicit contact information and reporting instructions within the text. One document highlighted that the library provides accommodations for individuals with disabilities and provided contact information for requesting an accommodation. Another document invited people viewing the policy to submit feedback. Most did include information about what actions would be taken if a violation of the conduct code was reported (68%). Twelve documents (39%) stated the date the document was last reviewed and updated and often included the dates of previous revisions in the documentation. One code had not been updated for 17 years, and another had been updated just this year. On average, the date of “last update” was six years ago.

### *Analysis of Themes*

Through an inductive thematic analysis, 41 thematic codes emerged from the data. The most common themes are described in table 3.

**TABLE 3**  
**Common Themes**

Theme	Number of Documents (N = 31)	Number of References
Damaging or theft of library property	26	47
Bringing animals into the library	26	27
Creating noise or disruption	24	43
Smoking, drinking alcohol, and other substances	24	35
Consuming food and drink	23	27
Harassing or threatening others	22	39
Refusing to leave the library	22	29
Talking on cell phones	21	25

Policies also commonly prohibited the use of “things with wheels” in the library such as bicycles, wheelies, and skateboards; vending or selling things; sexual behavior or exposure; leaving one’s belongings unattended; unplugging library computers; possessing weapons; entering unauthorized areas; and sleeping or hanging around the library too long. Surprisingly, given that this sample includes public universities serving the citizens of their states, most libraries in the sample (61%) explicitly excluded unaccompanied minors (though the age of who is considered to be a minor varied) from using their spaces. One document noted that children “should be prepared to show proof of age upon request.” Codes of conduct commonly referred to other library or campus policies through links or references, sometimes with obvious alignment (such as acceptable use of computers) and at other times, there seemed to be a more complex relationship (like concealed-carry regulations for firearms).

Overall, thematic codes fell into four content categories: “Actions or Behaviors” and “Prohibited Things” that are curtailed or prohibited by the policies, rules about the use of “Library Spaces,” and statements about rights and restrictions to “Freedom of Speech and Expression.” The prevalence of each theme, by category, is represented in figure 2.

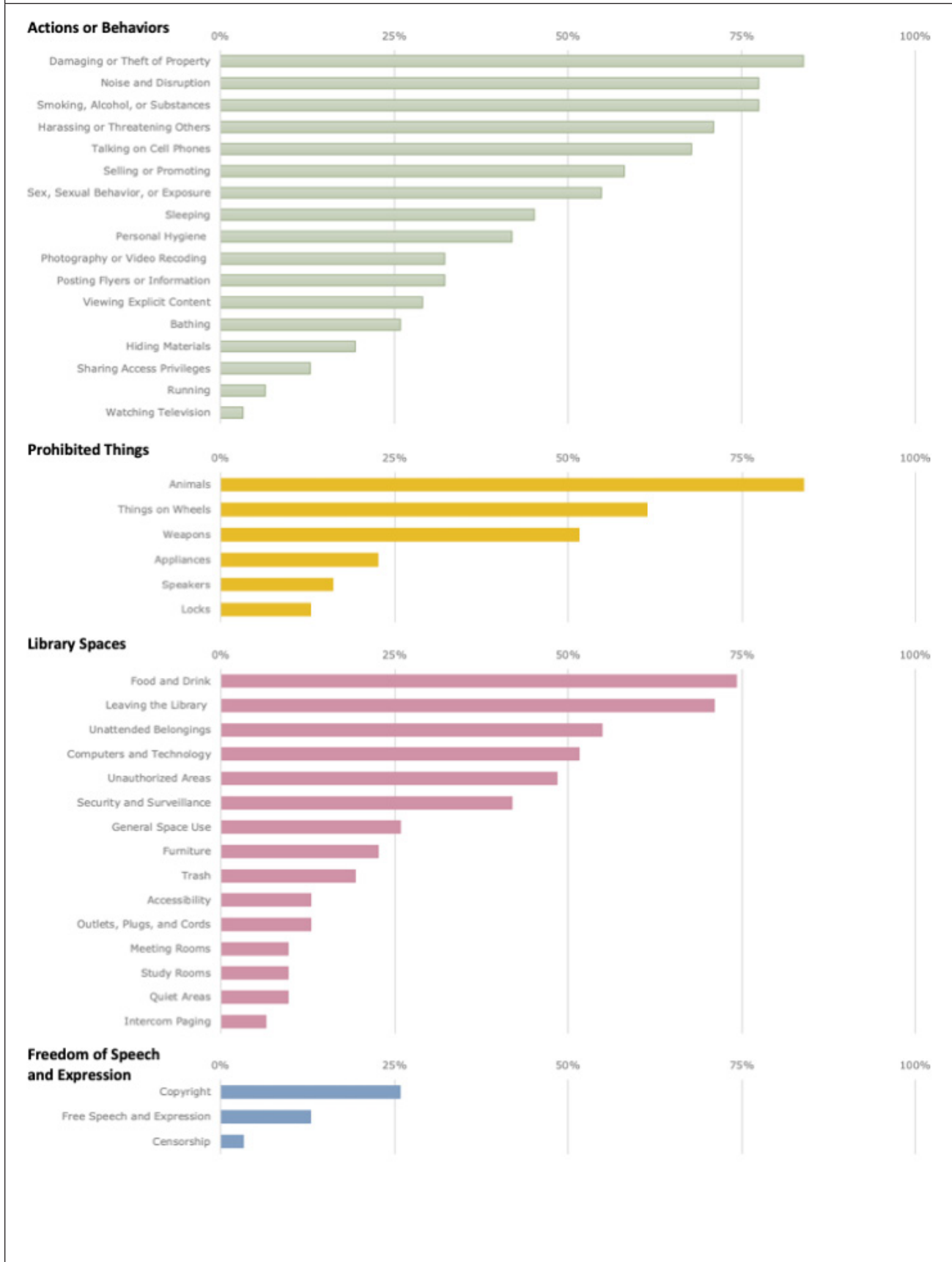
Most of the themes that emerged from the data described behaviors or items that are not allowed. To uncover the use of punitive language in the codes of conduct, the terms “prohibit,” “prohibited,” “not allowed,” “not permitted,” and so on were searched in the text of the documents, and variations of the terms appeared in codes of conduct in 27 of the 31 documents, a total of 188 times. One document, an outlier, used the terms 33 times despite being only 3 pages long and 604 words in length. On average, the terms were used 7 times in each of the 27 documents.

Categories within a document were frequently presented in a random or alphabetical order, rather than grouped by themes or levels of concern or severity. As a result, more or less severe categories of behaviors were often grouped together (for example, entering a prohibited staff space is listed next to sexual exhibitionism), or in other cases, randomly listed (for instance, “running, sleeping, or loitering” were listed together as prohibited).

Uncommon but notable mentions included “not running in the library,” “not watching television in the library,” and “not playing musical instruments in the library.” One library noted that “laptops are permitted” in the library, which seemed to be an unnecessary inclusion for any current learning environment. One document acknowledged concealed-carry



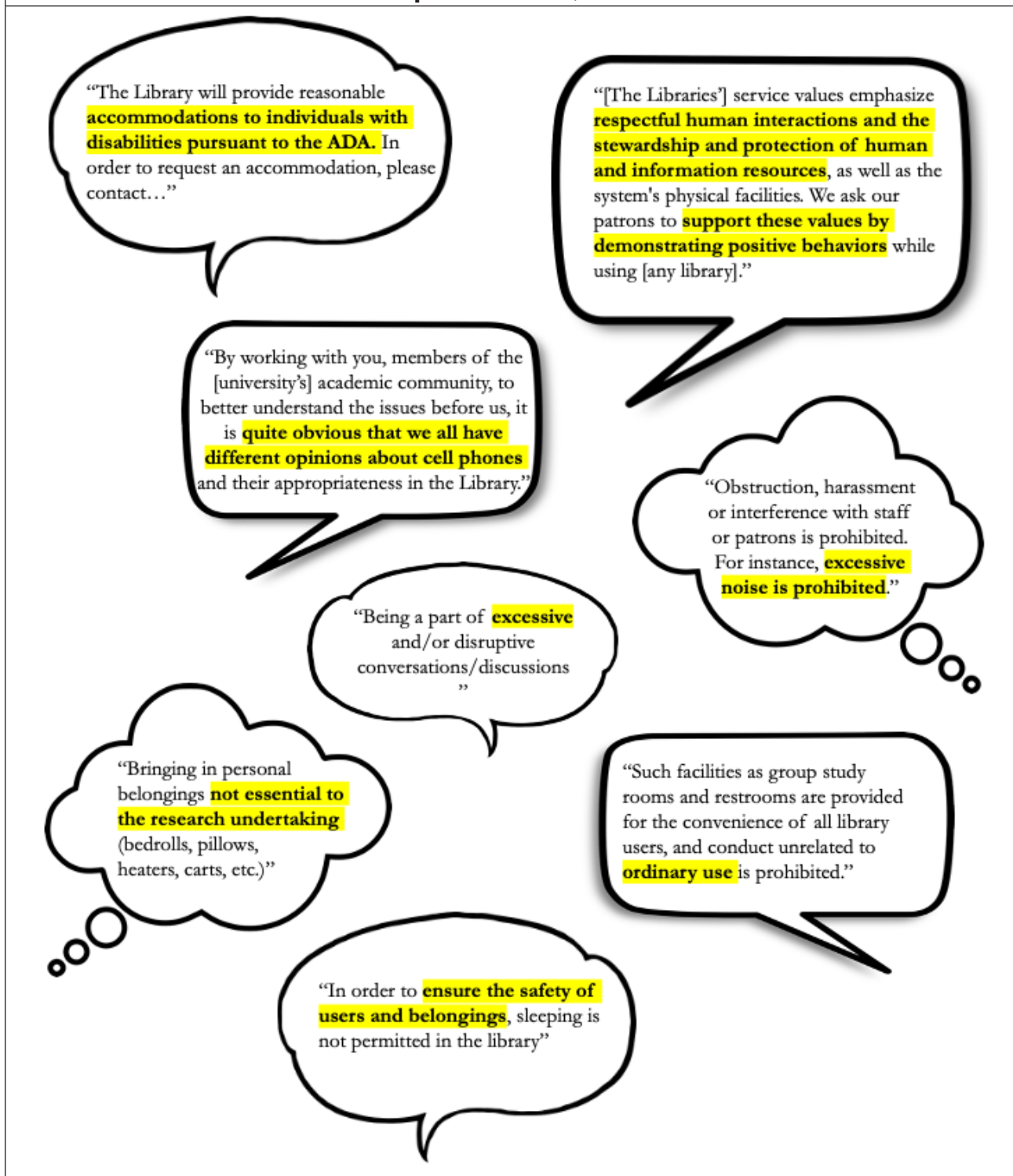
**FIGURE 2**  
**Prevalence of Themes in Codes of Conduct Documents (N = 31)**



laws at the state level and stated that the library does not provide “publicly-available secure storage for concealed handguns. Lockers located in multiple library locations do not provide secure storage for weapons of any type.” Here, codes of conduct may be reflective of local or state regulatory issues, which impact the policy context of the campus and academic library.

Representative quotes that emerged from the data are highlighted in figure 3.

**FIGURE 3**  
**Representative Quotes**



## Discussion of Dominant Discourses and Implications

In discourse analysis, the identification of themes allows for discourses to begin to take shape. The themes identified above revealed that a common purpose of codes of conduct policies is to control the behavior of users in libraries, which is explored further in the analysis below. The process of exposing dominant discourses can then allow library policymakers to begin to identify alternative discourses. For example, instead of using language that denotes control and authority, policymakers can identify language that is more respectful and compassionate toward students.

### *User Experience and Deficit Thinking*

Overall, the codes of conduct reviewed in this study prioritized the operational priorities of the library over the need to communicate clearly, usefully, and respectfully to their primary user population: students. Often, the focus of these documents is a laundry list of what users of library spaces are prohibited from doing. Few codes listed what users “can” or “will” be able to do in the library and more often list what cannot be done. Though often not explicit, this approach may reflect the practical purpose of these documents, which is to document what people are prohibited from doing in the library to justify enforcement of the policy when these actions occur. This approach identifies the behaviors of individual users as “problems” and establishes the policy elements as “solutions” to enable enforcement. The goal of the solution is that the individual will stop doing whatever is seen as the problem behavior.

At times, the creators of these codes of conduct are quite specific about problem behaviors. For example, two documents disallow students from using speakers or similar audio equipment in the library that may disturb other users; one, using somewhat obtuse language, refers to speakers as “audible sound generating devices.” Several documents (26%) prohibit library users from bringing appliances into the library, including microwaves, refrigerators, hot plates, space heaters, and coffee pots. Allowing people to use small appliances in the library is perhaps an understandable safety concern and potential violation of fire code, and the inclusion of appliances in these documents may be related to safety concerns or compliance with health and safety regulations. However, there are many items that would be inappropriate or unsafe to bring to the library, so one might assume that this category could be commonly included in codes of conduct, because students have *in fact* brought these items into the library and attempted to use them. Thus, codes may be reflections of a library’s common “problem log” entries.

As these documents communicate how library policymakers are regulating library spaces, the dominant discourse that emerges is of deficit and adultism; it is a discourse that assumes that students are irresponsible and require supervision.<sup>41</sup> The *problems* of managing a library space are articulated as behavioral issues displayed by users of the library; at flagship universities, one can assume these users are primarily students and primarily undergraduates. The *solutions* are then to prohibit such problems and ascribe consequences (loss of privileges, removal from building, calling the police) in response to undesirable behaviors. Uncovering and challenging the dominant discourses in policies allows one to explore alternative discourses. Here, instead of adding small appliances to what becomes “can’t do” list, an alternative user-centered and care-based discourse would be to ask in the development of this policy: “why are students bringing these items into the library?”; “what needs are not being met by the library or campus spaces?”; and “are there low-stakes, inexpensive solutions that would

increase student comfort, wellbeing, and belonging in our spaces?" More simply, instead of writing a policy to prohibit small appliances as the solution, a library policymaker might ask, "can we give student patrons access to kitchen spaces, so they can eat the food that they choose to bring from home?"

### *Basic Needs for Students*

Many codes of conduct specifically curtail students' ability to meet their basic needs, including eating and sleeping. Most libraries also set criteria for where students can eat or drink, and some even ban food altogether in their spaces. Fourteen documents (45%) do not allow users to sleep in the library. While some libraries explicitly do not allow users to sleep at all, others allow for "brief naps" or "dozing off" but will not let users arrange furniture into a configuration that would allow them to rest more comfortably. One code of conduct states, "laying down of bedding, arrangement of furniture or use of furniture for the purpose of sleeping is prohibited." Another policy outlines that using "library areas for prolonged sleeping or as living quarters" is prohibited. These policies may intend to discourage sleeping in the library to avoid inconveniencing other people using the shared space, but one library's sleep policy explains its logic. It states, "In order to ensure the *safety* of users and belongings, sleeping is not permitted in the library" [emphasis added]. This statement seems to imply that sleeping in the library is irresponsible because your belongings may be stolen, and the library policymakers know what is best for you. Another document mentions sleeping in the library and states that users cannot bring "personal belongings not essential to the research undertaking (bedrolls, pillows, heaters, carts, etc.)" into the library, and a different policy is explicit that groups cannot "camp out" for extended periods. As mentioned, if we are to assume that the elements that appear on these policies have been past issues in those libraries, then these codes of conduct seem to document that users of the library need a place to sleep and/or may even struggle with housing insecurity. While the library workers tasked with managing library spaces most certainly need to be able to safely close the library and have compliance when asking people to leave, these policies seem to point to a larger problem than the inconvenience of a bedroll or out of place furniture in the library spaces.

In some codes of conduct, libraries establish conflicting categories. For example, many codes prohibit sexual activity in the library but fewer state explicitly that sexual harassment is not tolerated. In one document, locks for laptops and bicycles are strictly prohibited, yet the library states that they are not responsible for the theft of any items left unattended in library spaces. Bicycles in the library are disallowed frequently in codes of conduct, yet the message from students here might be that there is not enough adequate or safe storage for their bicycles, which may be a primary mode of transportation for some students. Thirteen libraries include expectations of personal hygiene in their policies, but eight prohibit the use of bathrooms for bathing. For example, one document states that people cannot use "restrooms for bathing or shampooing, doing laundry, or changing clothes." In addition, given the prevalence of prohibiting bathing and sleeping in these documents, one might ask why there is not more literature in the profession on academic libraries and housing insecurity among our students, if it is documented so often through these policies. While there are practical and functional needs when managing behaviors in a shared space, creating a policy to prohibit an action or behavior may overlook and even negatively impact the most in-need and vulnerable student populations.

The alternative discourse would be for library policymakers to create codes of conduct that represent a genuine commitment to student well-being and success, and it may be beneficial to recall Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Maslow establishes a five-tier, pyramid model for human needs, the foundation of which must be met (physiological and safety needs), before one can reach the top of the pyramid, self-actualization.<sup>42</sup> Students must meet their basic needs—air, water, food, shelter, sleep, clothing—before they are able to rise through Maslow's hierarchy and meet their academic and learning needs. Through the lens of Maslow's model, many codes of conduct prevent people who use the library from meeting their basic needs and expect users to have already found ways to satisfy the base of the pyramid outside the library. The tone and focus of the policies communicates to students, "we don't trust you to eat or wash up or be responsible for your belongings." The students who will be most in need of support at the bottom of Maslow's pyramid will certainly be those individuals with fewer resources, less access to wealth, or limited social capital in academic spaces. When codes of conduct focus on the things people cannot do in library spaces, it is possible that libraries are missing an opportunity to support students in overcoming immediate barriers to academic success. Here, the policy discourses reveal one piece of how academic spaces may both reinforce and create achievement disparities among students.

### *The Absence of Social Responsibility and Justice*

The discourses revealed in the codes of conduct prioritize the policy representation of individual core values of librarianship inconsistently. Despite work in the profession to amplify and invest in inclusive and equitable approaches to librarianship, the core values of the profession that align most directly with those efforts were not cited in any codes of conduct: social responsibility, diversity, and the public good. Notably, "intellectual freedom" was the only ALA Core Value explicitly cited by the codes of conduct in this study, despite the relevance and applicability to building use and library spaces of many of the other ALA Values (that is, access, education and lifelong learning, and sustainability). For example, "illegal pornography" is explicitly prohibited by many codes of conduct. However, the texts seem to shy away from addressing how viewing *legal* sexual content in a visible, shared space may impact others, particularly women who are frequently the subject of degradation and hostility in this content.<sup>43</sup> While libraries have long debated how to balance the intellectual freedoms granted to individuals with the needs of their community, recent case law has reaffirmed that libraries can prohibit the act of viewing explicit content in public spaces.<sup>44</sup> Yet, when addressing explicit or offensive content, many documents cite only ALA's core value of intellectual freedom along with the positions of the Office of Intellectual Freedom.

In codes of conduct, library policymakers have also overlooked the community or social impacts related to how they choose to address the issue of harassment. While most policies state that they prohibit harassment, only one code of conduct went so far as to qualify harassment related to race or other identities. Some documents prohibited bathing in restrooms without acknowledging the needs of Muslim students who may need access to foot bathing stations, disproportionately impacting students who are already marginalized in western, higher education environments. The intended purpose of codes of conduct is to encourage some behaviors and discourage others. Given the history of racism and exclusion in the library profession, it is, at best, an unfortunate oversight that these aspects of the policies are not crafted with greater inclusivity and cultural awareness. Further, despite the frequent



and recent documentation of bias in the profession, the codes do little to reassure students, particularly students of color, that they will be treated with respect and that policies will be interpreted and applied fairly.<sup>45</sup>

Many library policymakers included statements in their codes of conduct that broadly and vaguely curtailed behavior, such as “behavior that interferes with normal use of the libraries is not allowed,” “behaviors that are inappropriate in library facilities are not allowed,” “being a part of excessive and/or disruptive conversations/discussions,” and “committing or participating in other activities *not listed* that are inconsistent with library activities.” Other similarly vague terminology commonly used included terms like “disruption,” “rowdiness,” and “disorderly” to point to prohibited behaviors. These subjective descriptors leave decisions about whether a code of conduct has been violated, and what steps to take to enforce its rules, to the interpretation of library workers and assumes that those individuals will apply the policy or interpret behavior in a neutral way. Yet, in a sociopolitical environment where the rules of crime and punishment are applied inequitably, library policymakers cannot expect that our policies and their enforcement are not subject to the same biases. Policies may also be used as tools to justify actions that are later called out as inappropriate or biased, because the enforcer was merely following the policy itself. In addition, only four of the documents provided reporting instructions or contact information for a person to use when they witness or experience a violation in the library. Thus, the purpose of these documents seems to be more for library workers to judge behavior but less as a tool for people who use the library to advocate for their own rights and safety in a shared space.

### *Security and Surveillance*

As mentioned in the results, some codes of conduct seemed to struggle with how to establish a safe learning environment when their public campus may be subject to local or state laws that permit open or concealed carry of firearms by students or the public. While an outlier, one document described that the library does not provide lockers as a service for the storage of deadly weapons, stating, “lockers located in multiple library locations do not provide secure storage for weapons of any type.” This inclusion points to the profound and complex role of public institutions, like libraries, within a political, social, or legal context that may conflict with their educational mission.

Other documents read more like policies of campus police departments than the library. Two codes of conduct stated that violations would be reported and addressed by university, municipal, or state law enforcement. Several included sections on security enforcement in the library. One document discloses that “areas of the [library] may be under video surveillance,” and another that “windows and doors must remain uncovered and unobstructed. Lights are to be left on,” pointing again to the library’s surveillance practices. Another code goes further; it states, “All persons on [university] property must identify themselves upon request of a [university] official acting in performance of their duties who reasonably suspect that the person has committed, is committing, or is about to commit a crime or a violation of a [university] rule or regulation.” While the preambles of these documents aspired to communicate a welcoming and safe tone, inclusions within the text certainly stray far from that verbiage.

When not looked at carefully, codes of conduct in academic libraries may be assumed to be benign and act as little-noticed tools for managing public spaces. However, in some codes of conduct, we see libraries addressing storage for guns, surveilling the users of the library,

and demanding identification if someone is suspected of being about to commit a violation. The discourses of militarism, security, policing, and surveillance have found their way into these library policies. This discourse is a prime example of the dangers of vocational awe, which assumes that the library is an inherently good actor, when, in these examples, it is the library that participates in the police state. To challenge this discourse, policymakers in libraries must ask themselves who this rhetoric serves and who does it not serve.

### *Implications*

The discourses about students that emerged in this study are ones framed by deficit-thinking and adultism. In most cases, the image of the student portrayed is of a person who is too irresponsible to be trusted. They bring inappropriate items to the library, and they do not clean up after themselves. The problem of the student is addressed by using these policies, which ask students not to do these things or risk losing the privilege of library access. The solution assumes that the problem's remedy is a simple choice by individuals when, more likely, the problems represented in these policies are far more connected to systematic or institutional inequities in higher education.

What is a policy and why do we have them? Most library workers will acknowledge the usefulness and importance of policies and documentation for the operational needs of academic libraries. But one might ask: How are we using policies to make the library better, not just to make it good or not be awful to the people who use the library, but how do we actively center their needs? What unconscious or conscious bias is reflected in these documents? How do they reproduce the dominant discourses in librarianship, high education, or society? Are students involved in the policy making? Is their input sought and listened to? Many codes of conduct have some positive moments that clearly communicate the services and support that libraries offer, as well as the climate they wish to maintain in the shared use of their space, but most are presented problematically. This study makes clear that most codes have neither been looked at with a critical, equity-focused lens nor examined to align with library's mission, values, and professional aspirations in mind. Our carefully crafted value and mission statements in academic libraries can seem to be true aspirations or mere marketing tools, depending on our policies and actions. The gap between *what we say* and *what we do* in libraries has been pointed out in the literature. Baharak Yousefi identifies disparities between the formal declarations made by academic libraries and frequent and historical examples of exclusion in the profession.<sup>46</sup> By comparison, this study reveals less of a gap: what we *say* in our policies is actually what we *do*. This analysis of policy documents exposes issues that are given meaning when placed in the context of the problems of librarianship: policies in academic libraries may replicate the norms of a profession dominated by white, middle-class values at the expense of our students (and our workforce), especially those who are most marginalized. These policies may promise safety in the library but fail to question "safe for whom?" Policymakers in academic libraries must reflect on the impact of implicit bias and racism in our profession and uncover how it manifests in our policies. In the case of codes of conduct, which often become lists of things that people cannot do in the library, there may be an opportunity to reimagine how we respond to conduct violations. As much as we need utilitarian tools for the practical management of library spaces, there may be ways to reframe conduct violations as information about user needs, which can be communicated and addressed by the library or elsewhere on campus through resource allocation.

## Limitations

This study does not consider how a library's code of conduct policy fits within the context of other policies, other strategic initiatives, or a university's or library's culture, which are factors that may influence how the policy is interpreted or used. The author did not have any information about who wrote these policies, why they were written, how often they are used, or how they are applied. The sample was subject to the availability of each policy online, and it is possible that libraries that do not post these policies may approach space management and messaging around their building policies differently. In addition, the policies included in this qualitative study represent academic libraries at public, state universities, and results are not necessarily generalizable to other library settings.

## Conclusion

In this study, the dominant discourses that emerged in codes of conduct failed to look at students as whole human beings who merit our best respect and care. The policies point toward individuals and individual actions as problems (a student brings a space heater to be warm and comfortable while they study, which is a liability), when these actions are more likely evidence of institutional or systematic issues (lack of investment in liberal arts and public education, which prevents campuses from providing plentiful and comfortable study spaces). As academic libraries work to reopen safely during the COVID-19 pandemic, our codes of conduct will be ever more important as library workers are tasked with social distancing and mask enforcement. Managing conduct during a pandemic—when adherence to public health guidelines has become political, and racial and economic disparities have been amplified—will be complex. Library managers and administrators may be keen to update their codes of conduct to reflect new expectations and compliance requirements for public health and safety during a pandemic as they reopen, while our students return to our campuses having experienced and continuing to experience stress and anxiety around their health and that of their friends and families. They may be grieving or traumatized or isolated. With this in mind, codes of conduct policies can be revisited and reshaped with an eye toward demonstrating care and respect for people as they come to learn in our reopened library spaces.

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