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# Creating a Periodic Table of Banned Books

A Community College Multimedia Project for Inclusion and Diverse Representation

The library at Springfield Technical Community College (STCC) in Massachusetts is home to a unique exhibit that highlights ongoing threats to intellectual freedom: the Periodic Table of Banned Books. This installation, and its accompanying events and social media campaigns, were inspired by the Periodic Table of Black History created by the Lakeland Public Library in Florida—and by Marian Wright Edelman’s famous saying: “You can’t be what you can’t see.”

Why did we create a periodic table of banned books? Focusing on the contemporary issue of banned books helps our students connect with literature that is relevant to or representative of their lived experiences. And as the only technical community college in Massachusetts, the format is fitting for our institution.

Created jointly by the STCC Library and STCC’s Office of Multicultural Affairs (OMA), the project launched in fall of 2022. It was born from a labor of love, a testament to true collaboration and teamwork, and a shared commitment to highlighting a major issue. We want to do our part to ensure that diverse stories remain accessible to anyone who wants to read them.



The original “Periodic Table of Banned Books” installation as it was unveiled in fall 2022.

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## The Context

The dramatic increase of book removals from libraries and schools in recent years is mainly driven by conservative reactivity to diverse identities depicted in young adult literature. As one YA author says, “the combination in these books of diversity and social justice on the one hand, and love and relationships on the other hand, can be explosive due to the cultural shifts and generational differences at play.” This leads some teens to feel “we are not welcome in society because books relating to our life experiences are banned.” Or they believe that their peers are being “deprived of learning that differences are beautiful, important, and necessary.”

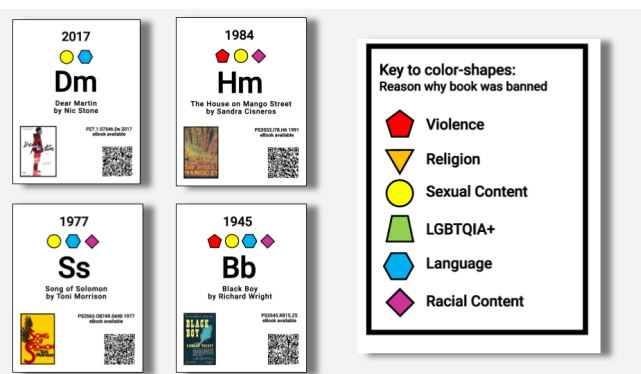
While the majority of such conflicts happen in K-12 schools and public libraries, three Penn State librarians argue that academic librarians are also obliged to support the freedom to read, declaring that “we can no longer take it for granted that intellectual freedom is a cherished goal. As a profession we need to make the positive case for intellectual freedom.” The STCC Library is fortunate to serve a campus community that supports this position.

In the words of one teen who co-founded a banned book club at their Florida high school, “book challenges are . . . a way to uphold systematic racism, classism, sexism, homophobia, and ableism.” In contrast, projects like ours promote freedom and inclusion by providing access to literature in which more young people can see themselves reflected and also learn about others.

## The Process

While the project was based on the periodic table of elements, we adapted the layout based on available wall space in our library. Team members suggested potential titles via a shared spreadsheet, and we held several meetings to establish criteria for selection, narrowing the list down from 120 titles to a final eighty-four. While a small number of older, classic texts were included, we wanted to make the exhibit as timely and relevant as possible, so we prioritized books our students are more likely to be familiar with: popular, recently published books. We also selected books of cultural relevance to our student population, books by a diverse set of authors, and books representing a variety of documented reasons for being banned. For the final step of narrowing the list down, we consulted book reviews. We made sure that all of the titles in the display would be available in print from our collection, purchasing those we did not already own.

Developing and constructing tiles for the book “elements” was a process of trial and error. First, we identified six common objections that book challengers cite as their reasoning for why they believe a book should be banned: violence, religion, sexual content, LGBTQIA+ content, language, and racial content. We represented them visually with a set of six distinct, colored shapes. Using both colors and shapes, rather than colors alone, makes it accessible to those with color blindness. Since books can be challenged for multiple reasons, the categories are not exclusive.



Four example book “tiles” and color-shape key.

We created the display so that the included books could be easily changed or updated over time. Each element tile was designed to print on standard 8.5” x 11” paper so they can be easily printed and replaced in the future as needed. This design was relatively low-budget. The only materials required for us to purchase were protective sleeves for the tile printouts, washers, and magnets to affix the tiles to the wall, and signage.

We wanted the installation to be interactive, with opportunities for students and faculty to engage, so each book tile includes a QR code that links to a webpage with further information about the book. These webpages provide context surrounding the book’s removal from libraries and/or schools, such as links to news articles and statistics from ALA, as well as a brief description of the book’s plot and information about borrowing the book. The website also offers a “Frequently Asked Questions” page, information about visiting the library to see the display, and resources for further reading about censorship.<sup>6</sup>

In early 2024, to keep the project current, we again went through a book selection process and added twenty new titles. Titles with low website engagement were deselected from the exhibit but not from the library collection.

## Events and Cross-Promotion

To increase engagement with the project, the OMA and the STCC Library hosted several events, beginning with a launch party to unveil the display. We collaborated with faculty to offer a community read of the book *Dear Martin*, and author Nic Stone gave a virtual talk for our campus community. OMA collaborated with our school’s Amy H. Carberry Fine Arts Gallery to offer a talk by Lee Francis IV on the topic of Native and Indigenous graphic novels and stories and debunking myths about indigenous culture. In addition, the OMA operations manager appeared on the Harriet Beecher Stowe Center’s podcast about censorship, free speech, and intellectual freedom.

To maintain awareness of censorship issues, we created monthly displays (“mini periodic tables”) on a whiteboard, highlighting titles with themes such as women’s history, Latinx authors, or religion, and we shared a “banned book of the week” on social media. In spring 2023, the library offered fifty giveaway tote bags with copies of *All Boys Aren’t Blue* and *Stamped: Racism, Anti-racism, and You*. In fall 2024, the library hosted a virtual panel discussion, “Censorship in Libraries,” featuring public librarians and a youth advocate.



Example of a monthly, “mini periodic table” display for LGBT History Month.

## Long-Lasting Impact

A major goal of this project is to educate our students and the public about intellectual freedom. Through providing tours of the display, it has become evident that a high percentage of our students are not aware that books are being removed from libraries and schools. Many students were distraught to learn that books they have read and loved are being censored in some places.

In addition to providing tours of the display for students, faculty, and staff, the STCC Library was featured in local news outlets' stories about censorship. We have received positive feedback on the project verbally, via email, via social media, through our website's virtual guestbook, and through a survey administered to community read participants.

This project has offered long-term, meaningful work for our reference librarians, with opportunities for creativity and skill-building. From researching and developing web content, to graphic design and installation, we will be able to use both the physical setup and the systems we created in future projects to benefit our students and campus community.

This project continues to make ripples across the Springfield Technical Community College campus and beyond. Our hope is that the Periodic Table of Banned Books continues to inspire and inform people about the importance of reading, the freedom to read what they want, and the power of seeing oneself in the content. Because, as ND Stevenson wrote in his introduction to Maia Kobabe's *Gender Queer*, "Seeing yourself in the world, knowing that you're not alone, that you could actually have a future as yourself—it's lifesaving." ❧

## Notes

1. Emily Corbett and Leah Phillips. "Ploughing the Field: Controversy and Censorship in US and UK YA Literature," *International Journal of Young Adult Literature* 4, no. 1 (December 10, 2023): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.24877/IJYAL.132>.

2. Priscilla Wu, "Library Links to Banned Books," *Poets and Writers*, January-February 2023, Gale General OneFile.

3. Rachel Li, Via Lipman, and Lisa Scherff, "'We Can't Be Sheltered': Why Banned Books Matter," *English Journal* 113, no. 3 (2021): 14–16, <https://doi.org/10.58680/ej2024113314>.

4. Joel M. Burkholder, Russell A. Hall, and Kat Phillips, "Manufactured Panic, Real Consequences: Why Academic Librarians Must Stand with Public and School Libraries," *College & Research Libraries News* 85, no. 6 (2024): 254–57, <https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.85.6.254>.

5. Li et al., "'We Can't Be Sheltered,'" 14–16.

6. STCC Reads Banned Books Homepage, STCC Library, <https://sites.google.com/stcc.edu/stccreads bannedbooks/home>.