

From the President

On March 14, 2024, the American Library Association (ALA) reported a record number of unique book challenges in 2023.¹ The press release went on to note a 65% increase in challenges of unique titles with 4,240 unique book title challenges and a total of 9,021 title challenges. These numbers represented a 92% increase in title challenges at public libraries, which accounted for nearly half of all book challenges occurring in 2023. Interestingly, the sharp increase in the sheer number of titles being challenged was related to groups and individuals challenging numerous, sometimes hundreds, of items at once rather than one specific title. Unfortunately, North Carolina was amongst 17 states who experienced attempts to censor more than 100 titles for the year.

Intellectual freedom, defined by ALA as “the right of library users to read, seek information, and speak freely as guaranteed by the First Amendment,”² is at the heart of what it means to be a library professional and is a pillar of a democratic society that values a well-informed citizenry. As can be seen in the trend to target multiple books rather than one title at a time, those who are engaging in title challenges are clearly organized and strategic in their efforts. As such, it becomes more imperative than ever for library professionals to be active participants in organizations that support the values of their profession and actively work to champion intellectual freedom. Fortunately for us, librarians are awesome at organizing!

The North Carolina Library Association (NCLA), with more than 1,000 members, is the only statewide organization that serves the needs of all library types. Members include public, school, academic, and community college librarians as well as paraprofessionals and librarians working in other private and govern-

ment sectors. NCLA does not operate in isolation and has partners at the state, regional, and national levels with which to share ideas and information. NCLA is an affiliate of ALA and the Southeastern Library Association



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(SELA), benefiting from the combined resources and support of these organizations. Participation in these organizations is crucial for NCLA, as evidenced by the existence of executive board positions specifically dedicated to engagement with them: ALA Councilor and SELA Representative. At the state level, NCLA maintains a close relationship with the State Library of North Carolina (SLNC). Active involvement in these associations ensures that NCLA and its members stay well-informed about legislative matters, advocacy initiatives, and emerging trends in the profession, particularly in areas concerning intellectual freedom.

NCLA has long been an advocate of intellectual freedom and has taken many steps to demonstrate this commitment. We have the Intellectual Freedom Committee and the Library Advocacy and Legislation Section (LALS), both devoted to supporting

¹ “American Library Association reports record number of unique book titles challenged in 2023,” American Library Association, March 14, 2024. <http://www.ala.org/news/press-releases/2024/03/american-library-association-reports-record-number-unique-book-titles> (Accessed April 12, 2024)

² “Support for Intellectual Freedom,” American Library Association, December 18, 2017. <http://www.ala.org/tools/challengesupport/selectionpolicytoolkit/intellectualfreedom> (Accessed April 12, 2024)

libraries in defending intellectual freedom, staying up to date on legislation affecting intellectual freedom, and engaging in actions to impact key decision makers across various levels of government in passing legislation relevant to libraries. At the encouragement of Intellectual Freedom Committee Chair, Anne Mavian, and with the support of the NCLA Executive Board, in September 2022 NCLA became an organizational partner of [Unite Against Book Bans](#), a national non-partisan grassroots campaign to engage the public in the fight against censorship. The website offers a number of free resources, such as toolkits, Book Resumes to defend particular titles, news and updates, and more. In order to advocate for legislation and funding related to libraries, each year NCLA sends leaders of LALS and the executive board to join SLNC in Congressional fly-ins to connect and share stories about libraries with U.S. senators and representatives from our state. Finally, having been aware of the rising threats to intellectual freedom in more recent years, NCLA issued a Censorship Statement stating:

The mission of the North Carolina Library Association (NCLA) is to promote libraries, library and information services, and librarianship; and to champion intellectual freedom and literacy programs. NCLA further acknowledges that one of our own goals is to identify and help resolve special concerns of minorities and women in the profession. With this, we recognize the pain and harm that challenges of this nature inflict on the LG-BTQIA community – a minority community. We also recognize that the challenges raised recently speaks to the heart of intellectual freedom and why it is so important for libraries to have access to materials that cover all points of view.

We encourage all libraries to review and update selection processes to ensure collections are diverse, equitable, and inclusive. Public libraries have a responsibility to represent a broad range of materials in their collections and to meet the needs of everyone in the community, including those who may be marginalized or part of a minority. While

individual library users have the right to voice their concerns about a library book and select different materials for themselves and their own families, those objecting to a book should not be given the power to restrict other users' right to access those books. Library selection policies should reflect these concepts. (rev April 2023)³

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Although 2023 saw a record number of title challenges, escalation in the level of organization involved in title challenges, and further politicization of intellectual freedom, library professionals are fortunate to have the skills and resources to respond in thoughtful and effective ways that benefit our users. Becoming involved in a professional organization, such as NCLA, is one way that every library professional can play a role in the fight to support intellectual freedom. The level of involvement can range from being a member to serving as the leader of a section or committee on the NCLA Executive Board.

As we enter an election year, there is a risk of increased polarization in our communities and workplaces. Despite any differences in our political views, library professionals are clear in their unified stance toward the value of intellectual freedom and our role in serving the needs of our users. And not just individual users, but our communities writ large. In 2012, R. David Lankes tweeted, “Bad libraries build collections, good libraries build services, great libraries build communities.” As library professionals, our communities extend beyond our places of employment into the broader scope of our membership and service in the professional organizations that help keep us all connected, informed, and inspired. The most important thing is that we stand together, support one another, and continue to lead a united charge in protecting the intellectual freedom that our communities are built upon.

³ “Intellectual Freedom Committee,” North Carolina Library Association, April 2023. <https://nclaonline.org/Intellectual-Freedom-Committee>