

Culture wars in the Commonwealth: Public libraries, book bans, and the First Amendment

Natisha Harper^a, Amber Matthews^a

^aOld Dominion University, USA

nharp011@email.edu, a1matthe@odu.edu

ABSTRACT

Public libraries are quickly losing the ‘culture war’ being waged against them (Jones, 2024). They also lack the coordinated support, resources, and legislative power of those leading the national assault on the right to read, intellectual freedom, and the First Amendment (ALA, 2024). Few resources provide timely and relevant guidance for public libraries on negotiating book challenges with concerned community members, elected officials, and interested parties. This research study responds to nascent ‘culture war’ developments in Virginia – specifically, recent government interference in public library governance in Warren County in December (Schneider, 2024) and a new bill targeting ‘obscene’ materials tabled in January 2025 (VA Senate Bill No. 931)– to propose a pilot research study with Virginia public library staff, administrators, and volunteers familiar with local book challenges and negotiations to understand better how organizational negotiation capability impacts their outcomes (Gordon & Furlong, 2023). It uses qualitative (semi-structured interviews) and quantitative (Negotiation Assessment Tool) methods to provide invaluable local and state research and evidence-based approaches to inform these increasingly high-stakes negotiations (Gordon & Furlong, 2023; Seidman, 2019). It builds on the co-Principal Investigators strong body of research in equity, assessment, and public librarianship (Harper et al., 2021; Matthews, 2020, 2021a, 2021b, 2025; Matthews & Thomas, 2022, 2025; Mongeon et al., 2021) along with their combined thirty years of professional experience in librarianship and community development to propose a timely study to advance a more comprehensive understanding of book challenge negotiations and support public libraries on a state and national level.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Public libraries; Intellectual freedom; Information policy; Social justice.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Book challenges; Virginia.

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