

# Teaching Intellectual Freedom: Collaboration Between Academia, Advocacy, and the Law

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## ABSTRACT

Attempts to censor library materials and services are on the rise, with new data indicating that it ties most of library censorship to organized campaigns. The American Library Association (ALA), the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom, and their ALA affiliates recognize that the education of librarians about intellectual freedom is important in defending First Amendment rights. A dominant response to the need for teaching about intellectual freedom in libraries invokes a critical inquiry into library and information science content and pedagogy used in intellectual freedom teaching and learning as an authentic expression of protecting legal rights to give and receive information. The voices of enrolled students in a new intellectual freedom course at Emporia State University, School of Library and Information Management, are authentic expressions of their new awareness of how policy and law are central to effective education, communication, and efforts to unite and protect the freedom to read and support library workers at a critical time in American history. The Unite Against Book Ban campaign and Law for Librarians and Lawyers for Libraries (L4L) programs are highlighted in their active pursuit to provide excellent educational opportunities and resources, and as examples of pedagogical and curricular resources for intellectual freedom education.

## **ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPIC**

Intellectual freedom; Information privacy; Academic libraries; Public libraries; School libraries.

## **AUTHOR KEYWORDS**

Teaching intellectual freedom; Library and information science.

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# Teaching Intellectual Freedom: Collaboration Between Academia, Advocacy, and the Law

Understanding intellectual freedom is essential to protecting access to information for library patrons, upholding First Amendment rights in all types of libraries, and is central to educating librarians, library workers, and community members to be effective advocates for the freedom to read. In an era where misinformation, censorship, and political polarization threaten the free press and libraries in the U. S., the American Library Association (ALA) and the ALA Office for Intellectual Freedom (ALA OIF) along with affiliates including the Freedom to Read Foundation (ALA FTRF), the ALA Public Policy and Advocacy Office (ALA PPAO), and Lawyers for Libraries and Law for Librarians (ALA L4L), are reaching thousands of library and information studies educators, librarians, library trustees, and library advocates. These efforts have in common that they are dedicated to advocating, defending, and protecting each person's First Amendment right to read. For the benefit of these common goals, this manuscript provides an overview of three platforms for action - - academic, advocacy, and law.

## Intellectual Freedom Described

The concept of intellectual freedom, which encompasses the right of every individual to seek, receive, and share information and ideas from all perspectives without restriction (Magi, T., & Garner, M., 2021), runs throughout the ALA *Library Bill of Rights* (last amended 2019), the ALA Code of Ethics (last amended 2022), and the ALA Standards for Accreditation of Master's Programs in Library and Information Studies (2023). Librarians strive to protect each library user's privacy and to resist all efforts to censor library resources. These ethical mandates may seem simple, but the rise of censorship in the 2020s has challenged the simplicity of these ideas, proving that, in practice, intellectual freedom issues are tricky – rife with legal implications, complex policymaking, and specialized training to understand how to resist efforts to remove books from shelves or engage in soft censorship.

Librarians must be prepared to address intellectual freedom and to safeguard their libraries because threats to intellectual freedom are pervasive. The ALA's OIF is seeing an unprecedented array of tactics being used to censor books that represent certain viewpoints and to control what libraries can put on their shelves and what people can read when they visit libraries. Library systems have been subjected to onerous lawsuits and bomb threats, and librarians have been harassed and fired for doing their jobs. Between January 2023 and August 2024, ALA's OIF documented 1,689 challenges to library materials targeting almost 5,000 books. 666 public libraries and 652 school libraries reported censorship incidents during the same time period, and 39 reported receiving bomb threats. Staff were terminated or resigned under duress for protecting intellectual freedom in at least 50 libraries.

## Intellectual Freedom in Libraries Master's Course

While intellectual freedom has long been a foundational element of librarianship, the U. S. is at a sociopolitical moment where understanding, implementing, and upholding intellectual freedom concepts is a necessary part of library education. Failing to provide librarians with

intellectual freedom education sends them into the field unprepared for what they may face in school, public, and academic libraries. Collaboration in educating graduate library and information studies candidates about intellectual freedom is a strategy the ALA's OIF and FTRF prioritizes to teach about the First Amendment right to speak, write, publish, read, and receive information, and to counter the widely held and frequently publicized claim that books addressing sex and/or gender identity, sexual orientation, and/or critical race theory are legally harmful to minors. Through collaboration between ALA and university officials, the first session of a fully online course, *Intellectual Freedom in Libraries*, took place in the fall of 2024 at Emporia State University in the School of Library and Information Management (SLIM). This course, which is now offered every fall and spring semester, is unique in its content and delivery, including being open for enrollment by any students enrolled in any LIS program in the U.S. The course curriculum was determined through discussions with ALA and university scholars with expertise on censorship and intellectual freedom. The course curriculum was designed, and pedagogical choices were made by Dr. Mirah Dow, the first SLIM professor to teach this course. The course curriculum has been continuously reviewed in light of student evaluations that indicate areas for more instruction and guidance and/or revised content likely to improve students' learning experience. The *ALA Intellectual Freedom Manual*, 10<sup>th</sup> ed. (2021), is used each semester in required assignments.

### ***Core Value and Foundational Principle***

The intellectual freedom in libraries course examines intellectual freedom as a core value of librarianship and a foundational principle for library professionals (Magi, T., & Garnar, M., 2021; Knox, E. J. M., 2023; Oltman, S. M., 2019, 2023). Students learn to define intellectual freedom and to articulate, promote, and defend intellectual freedom practices and policies as a key component of professional practice in all library types and various information programs and services. Students do multiple assignment exercises, including reading, writing, discussions, and quizzes. They address the impact of challenges and book bans on libraries; analyze library confidentiality and privacy policies; discuss predominant legal theories used to explain freedom of speech and access to information, and the history of intellectual freedom court cases; and learn best practices to defend against censorship in libraries. Students practice using accurate, open, and honest communication to promote intellectual freedom. Students interact using video conferencing software with authors of intellectual freedom textbooks, librarians who experience first-hand the impact of book challenges and bans, authors of banned books, as well as with each other, sharing their recent frontline library experiences with those in their community who desire to censor library books.

### ***Course Learning Outcomes***

Learning activities are designed to facilitate students' achievement of five intellectual freedom-related course learning outcomes.

1. Define intellectual freedom as it applies to fundamental practices in school, public, and academic libraries.
2. Discuss and explain intellectual freedom in terms of *ALA Core Values of Librarianship*, *The Library Bill of Rights*, the *ALA Code of Ethics*, and other intellectual freedom documents and related statements.
3. Articulate intellectual freedom as a professional practice in protecting the freedom to read, privacy, advocacy for information diversity, and library collections and policies.

4. Develop an effective message and ways to engage in meaningful dialogue, sharing concerns about the support of censorship.
5. Identify ways that the American Library Association promotes and defends intellectual freedom through staff services and resources.

Students are evaluated on their ability to demonstrate knowledge about intellectual freedom and professional competencies (ALA Core Competencies of Librarianship, 2023), which are aligned with course learning outcomes. Students received feedback from the Professor with scores on each competence (excellent, satisfactory, unsatisfactory) and comments from the Professor addressing strengths and weaknesses in the submitted assignment. Students are invited and encouraged to continue with the Professor’s guidance to improve an unsatisfactory assignment submission, resulting in an improved score and successful completion of the course.

### ***Students’ Impressions and Reactions to the Course***

In spring 2025, students were invited to discuss the Intellectual Freedom in Libraries course. Six students wrote their impressions and reactions to the course, giving written permission for their writing to be shared with LIS educators at the 2025 ALISE Conference. The narrative data (6,550 words) written by students was analyzed using open coding, first reading through the narrative data several times to create statement categories, and the axial coding method was used to identify relations among the data (Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Intellectual Freedom Course: Students’ Response Categories, Number of Items, and Example Response Statements*

<b>Students’ Response Categories</b>	<b>Number Items (56)</b>	<b>Example Response Statements</b>
1. Usefulness in learning about intellectual freedom	12	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The IF course helps in a way that promotes action and advocacy.</li> <li>2. For the first time, I could see where the law supports actions of librarians.</li> <li>3. Learning about IF is not only useful, but also necessary.</li> <li>4. I became aware of librarians’ role as facilitators and defenders of public resources.</li> <li>5. IF concepts are touched on in various MLS courses. Deeply exploring IF feels invaluable.</li> </ol>
2. Usefulness in learning about major topics in the <i>ALA IF Manual</i> (10 <sup>th</sup> edition)	13	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. It is extremely useful.</li> <li>2. It is incredibly useful.</li> <li>3. I learned. . . that libraries are meant to be biased, not politically biased but biased in favor of IF and serving library users effectively.</li> <li>4. The <i>ALA IF Manual</i> has positioned me to defend the rights of my community.</li> <li>5. It is important to me that the Manual includes definitions, info about laws, patron rights, advice for different types of libraries, policy writing, and advice for responding to IF challenges.</li> </ol>
3. Preparation to promote and defend IF library practices and policies	8	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I have strong reference sources in the <i>ALA Intellectual Freedom Manual</i>.</li> <li>2. I have been applying what I learned . . . in lobbying my legislators.</li> <li>3. Prior to this course, being faced with IF challenges felt daunting . . . I feel prepared and confident.</li> <li>4. I feel confident. . . I can communicate with strong conservative community members.</li> <li>5. I feel poised to handle confrontations gracefully . . .</li> </ol>
4. Actions to defend and promote intellectual freedom	23	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I will share the IF message I created during this course.</li> <li>2. Keep up to date with the latest book challenges and bans.</li> <li>3. I am positioned to write policies.</li> </ol>

	<p>4. I will share a message that affirms the rights of individuals to make their own reading choices.</p> <p>5. I will show up in my library every day, ready to positively reinforce the value of IF for all.</p>
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## Intellectual Freedom Course: Professor’s Impressions and Reactions

There are several key points from the Professor’s perspective on the course worth emphasizing when sharing knowledge about intellectual freedom in librarianship, policies, and the law.

### *Readiness to Learning about Intellectual Freedom*

Many LIS students indicate that they have little exposure to the law, lawmaking, and its basis for governance. In this graduate-level course, students can gain an understanding of local, regional, and national legislatures, how they are influenced by lobbyists, pressure groups, partisan consideration, and by the voters who elect legislators. When law and lawmaking are addressed in the context of libraries and censorship, a topic they are very passionate about, students’ interest and motivation to learn appear high.

### *Instructional Strategy*

In addition to working independently in the online environment, when learning about intellectual freedom and recent attempts to censor or harm librarians and libraries, students need to have opportunities through video conferencing to talk with classmates and their professor. Some related situations appear to be too difficult and emotional for some students to “unpack” well if writing is the only option.

### *Policy Analysis and Creation*

Master’s students benefit from reading and studying library policy statements. They appear to learn the most from comparing and contrasting well-written policy and incomplete and/or vaguely written policy documents. Providing a teacher-made outline of items to look for in an existing policy is also positively instructive, enabling students to prepare for creating new policies and guiding library workers to respect and uphold library policies.

### *Resources Selection*

Given that the organized movement in the U.S. to control libraries, librarians, and access to books has been constantly and swiftly involved in multiple actions across many states, library and information studies students prefer to use their computer technology and digital publications to stay informed and up-to-date. The selection of assigned reading materials must be current and provide students with timely indications of recent circumstances. The *ALA Intellectual Freedom Manual*, available in print and eBook formats, and the Adverse Library Legislation Tracker (Quorum AI), as well as ALA websites, including the ALA PPAO and the ALA OIF programs titled *Law for Librarians and Lawyers for Libraries (L4L)*, are valued resources.

## **Advocacy through Policy – Preparing Librarians to Uphold Intellectual Freedom**

The ALA Unite Against Book Ban campaign, sponsored by the ALA Public Policy and Advocacy Office, is a resource that provides both librarians and non-librarians with advocacy skills and intellectual freedom material to support First Amendment rights. It serves as one of the ALA's public platforms for efforts related to book bans and offers resources for addressing censorship. It also anticipates the need for librarians to improve their practical understanding of theory, service delivery, and policy applications in areas such as collection development, materials reconsideration, internet and meeting room use, exhibit space, and user privacy related to intellectual freedom and access to services.

The United Against Book Ban website contains toolkits on advocacy, partnerships, messaging strategies, and details about banned book titles available on the website titled *Book Résumés*, which is designed to help teachers, librarians, parents, and community members defend books from censorship. This resource details each title's significance and educational value and is easy to share with administrators, book review committees, elected officials, and board members. This initiative targets an audience that includes librarians and community members interested in opposing censorship by equipping them with relevant tools. Its main focus is advocacy and community organizing.

## **Law and Librarians and Lawyers for Libraries**

The ALA OIF receives hundreds of requests to educate libraries on intellectual freedom issues, including how to make First Amendment-compliant policies, what to do when law enforcement visits the library, how to talk to school boards and parents who are trying to censor books in the collection, and what to do when the library is targeted with an intellectual freedom-related attack or harassment. In response to an onslaught of educational requests, the Office re-launched programs called Law for Librarians and Lawyers for Libraries (L4L).

When the Office advertised its first round of L4L training, it received an excited, eager response from hundreds of librarians who desired intellectual freedom training. In May 2024, the first L4L training cohort gathered in Chicago and received an intensive course on intellectual freedom and the law taught by a faculty of lawyers, including Sarah Lamdan, Deobrah Caldwell-Stone, Theresa Chmara, Kyle Courtney, and Cole Adams. These lawyers taught the attendee librarians about First Amendment law and libraries, censorship in libraries, filtering on library platforms, privacy in libraries, making legally compliant library policies, and what to do if your library is threatened with intellectual freedom challenges. After the in-person intensive weekend course, librarians met monthly for webinar trainings and office hours where they could ask questions and receive updates from the faculty. Sarah Lamdan set the curriculum and has maintained and updated it based on the librarians' needs and requests throughout the year.

Librarians who attended the training included those from school, public, and academic libraries. The cohort included 89 librarians from 45 states. Each librarian who attended the training was tasked with returning to their state and providing at least two trainings to library workers in their state. Within a year, those librarians provided over 100 training opportunities to over 6,000 local library workers and other library stakeholders, including library boards, teachers, lawyers, and policymakers. The librarians have also coordinated intellectual freedom

educational sessions at state and national library and educational conferences. The L4L program fills a gap in some LIS curricula; however, this type of education serves all librarians and should be taught as part of a library education.

## **Summary**

Important to life in a democratic society is intellectual freedom and privacy. Democracy and freedom depend on the basic premise that people can speak out, organize, and take part in public life without fear. We must welcome and respect dissenting points of view. Librarians must be educated to understand, defend, and promote intellectual freedom that empowers people to think for themselves, to make informed decisions, and to debate issues in civil discourse. These premises are central to librarianship as clearly articulated in the ALA Core Values of Librarianship, the ALA Code of Ethics, and the ALA Standards for Accreditation of Master's Programs in Library and Information Studies.

To educate librarians for their important work in today's society, LIS education must include intellectual freedom as a curricular content area and be taught by LIS educators who are cognizant of librarians, libraries, library policy, and have legal expertise to defend, promote, and protect intellectual freedom and access to information in libraries and schools. Making good use of ALA initiatives and resources can enable LIS educators to be prepared to design and deliver graduate courses that invoke content and pedagogy that sends librarians into the field prepared for what they may face in school, public, and academic libraries. ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom is ready and available to consult with library programs wishing to incorporate intellectual freedom into their curricula and learning environments.

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