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**Annotated Bibliography of Challenged Material Policies in Libraries**

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**Abstract**

While few librarians or libraries want to deal with the possibility of patrons submitting challenges to material held in their collections, it is a reality of the position of libraries in our communities that this will happen. Because this is an area that can lead to poor representations of libraries in both the media and the general public consciousness, it is important for libraries to have fully developed policies to deal with all aspects of these challenges. This article looks at why a library needs these policies, and examines various resources concerning them.

**Table of contents**

**1. Introduction**

**Topic.....3**

**Purpose.....3**

**2. Resources**

**Articles.....6**

- Frank, B. "Just a bunch of bigots" A case study in the acquisition of controversial material.
- Manzo, K. Challenged.

- McMenemy, D. Censorship or recklessness? Obligations and legality regarding controversial materials in libraries.
- Preer, J. Prepare to Be Challenged!
- Scales, P. Challenged: A formal process provides teaching moments.
- Tsompanakis, S. A discussion and suggestions on ethical barriers in librarianship: Information privacy, controversial materials, and personal beliefs.

**Books and other documents.....7**

- Cabeceiras, J. Responding to Request to Censor.
- *Guidance on the management of controversial material in public libraries.*
- Jones, R. Controversial Materials in Libraries.

**Library Policies.....8**

- Beaufort County Library. Challenged Materials Policy.
- Free Library of Philadelphia. Reevaluation of Materials.
- MacOdrum Library. Challenged Materials in the Library Policy.
- Mead Public Library. Challenged Materials Policy.
- Pikes Peak Library District. Challenged Materials Policy.
- Ryerson University Library Archives. Challenged Material.
- Seattle Public Library. Selection and Withdrawal of Library Materials.
- Strathmore Library. Challenged Materials.
- Vancouver Public Library. Collection Development Policy.
- Wasco County Library Service District. Challenged Materials.
- Western Kentucky University Libraries. Challenged Material Statement regarding Censorship/Intellectual Freedom.

**Websites.....10**

- The American Library Association Intellectual Freedom Committee. Dealing with Concerns about Library Resources.
- The American Library Association Intellectual Freedom Committee. Sample Request for Reconsideration of Library Resources.
- The Cooperative Children’s Book Center (CCBC). Suggested Steps to Take When Materials Are Challenged.
- Cruz, R. Be Prepared with a Challenged Materials Policy.
- Freedom to Read Week. Position Statement.
- Lanier, G. Conducting a challenge hearing.
- The Office for Intellectual Freedom of the American Library Association. Intellectual Freedom Manual.
- The Office for Intellectual Freedom of the American Library Association. Strategies and Tips for Dealing with Challenges to Library Materials.
- The Office for Intellectual Freedom of the American Library Association. Workbook for Selection Policy Writing.
- Pateman, J. Management of controversial material in public libraries.
- Wilkie, S. Guidance on the management of controversial material in public libraries.

## **Part 1: Introduction**

### **Topic: Creating policies to deal with challenged materials in public libraries**

This bibliography is an overview of resources that cover public library policies relating to challenged material and could be used by a library looking to create or improve upon their own policies. It will discuss the reasons why such policies are necessary, the areas that such a policy should cover, and the related policies that a library should have. Following the discussion are brief descriptions of resources that deal with the creation of challenged materials policies and why they may, or may not, be useful.

### **Purpose**

While few librarians or libraries want to deal with patrons submitting challenges to material held in their collections, it is a reality of the position of libraries in our communities that this will happen. Because this is an area that can lead to poor representations of libraries in both the media and the general public consciousness, it is important for libraries to have fully developed policies to deal with all aspects of these challenges. While some of these policies will deal directly with the process of receiving and dealing with challenges, others will deal with other aspects of the library, or of the policies themselves.

There are generally seven areas that a policy for challenged material should cover: who can submit a challenge, how they can submit a challenge, the format of challenges, what the library does when it receives a challenge, if/how appeals from patrons to library decisions will work, how the library should deal with media inquiries related to challenges, and policies regarding the policies themselves.

1. The first area of policy to be addressed is who may submit a challenge. This can be important because, while the library may need to respond to the interests of the community, they must decide who that community is. Some policies state that those submitting a challenge must have read or watched the material they are challenging, or that the challenger must be a resident of the area where the library is located.
2. The next area of policy is how a patron may submit a challenge to library material. Policies usually require a patron to complete a form stating who they are, what material they are challenging, and their reasons for challenging this material. While it is important to make these forms easily available to patrons, the first step of any challenge should be to try to resolve any problems a patron might have with library material before they even submit a written challenge. This can be done by talking to a patron who approaches a library employee with a challenge, and discussing why the library has this material based upon selection policies, whom the library is serving, and the process of material acquisition.

During these discussions it is important for patrons to feel as though their opinions are important to the library, and that their concerns are taken seriously.

3. If a patron decides that they still wish to submit a written complaint, the next area of policy concerns the creation of a challenge form. How these forms are written can affect how a patron feels concerning their challenge (and is discussed in Preers article, *Prepare to Be Challenged!*). For example, offering checkboxes concerning why they are challenging a specific material may make it easier to classify their concerns and create a response, but may also lead to them choosing more challenges than they initially intended on doing. Even the name or language of this form can have an effect on the relationship between the patron and the library and should be considered.
4. The next area of policy regards what happens to a patron's challenge once it has been submitted to the library. The library policy should state who the challenge goes to, and what will be done to address the challenge. Various libraries have created different types of policies with different numbers of levels. Some feature subcommittees assigned to evaluate the work from the very beginning, while others leave the initial evaluation up to a single librarian. All should state exactly what is being done in regards to the challenge, and how and on what levels a material is being evaluated.
5. Many libraries allow for patrons to appeal the initial response from the library concerning their material challenge. A policy should include whether appeals are allowed, and what form they should take. They usually take the form of patrons bringing their concern to the library board, either in a private meeting, or in a public forum of some kind. In either case there should be policies in place to make sure that the patron is given a fair forum for discussing their challenge. These policies can include things such as speaker lists and time limits for public forums, or official responses not being immediately released following meetings. In any case, the patron should be aware of these policies before they enter into the meeting.
6. Related to policies concerning meetings and public forums are those concerning media interaction. At times, media can become involved in a patron's challenges to library material, and it is important for the library to be prepared. This means there should be policies in place concerning writing and sending press releases, who can talk to the media as a representative of the library, and what message the library should be trying to present to both the media and the public.
7. The final area of policy concerning material challenges is that of policies about other policies. While this may seem fairly arcane at first, its importance becomes more obvious when examined more closely. While the creation of policies is important, these same policies must be kept up to date, and it is important for libraries to feature systems that allow for policies to be regularly reviewed and updated. This is especially vital with regard to laws that may affect what sort of material a library may be able to defend having in its collections, or even be legally allowed to own.

Additionally, it is important to have policies ensuring that policies regarding how patrons may make challenges of material are freely available to them. This ensures that patrons are aware of the process they must go through in order to submit a challenge, the methods which their response will be dealt with, and any further steps that can take if they are unsatisfied with the initial response. It can also be beneficial to feature timelines indicating to patrons how long each step will take, and when they can expect a response concerning their challenge. While it might seem as though not making this information easily accessible to the public will reduce the number of complaints, it can lead to patrons going through other, more public, avenues when attempting to challenge material.

Education is another area where policies about policies becomes important. A library can have a great policy concerning how to deal with patron challenges, but if the employees and board members of the library are unaware of these policies, then problems can arise when a challenge is raised. It is important to ensure that employees receive training to educate them on how to deal with patron challenges and the policies that exist in that area. Similarly, it is important for board members to be aware of what policies a library has in place concerning challenges to material, selection policies, and why a library has chosen to implement those policies.

Another area of policy concerning challenges to material are the policies that will be referred to when evaluating the material in question. These include selection policies, the library mandate, the mission statement of the library, documents concerning intellectual freedom, and so forth. The creation of these policies is not part of the creation of a challenge to material policy, and, while used in evaluating materials and writing responses to patron challenges, they should be created independently.

It may be beneficial to ensure that policies regarding the security of library materials mention that challenged material can be at a greater risk. Unfortunately, only one source I found mentioned this explicitly.

While most libraries will deal with a small number of challenges (any theoretical library that deals with thousands every year presumably has many other problems), it is still important for them to have the proper policies in place to deal with them. A library that deals poorly with a challenge to the material they have in their collection risks losing the support of the community they are supposed to serve. Thankfully, it seems that the vast majority of libraries already have these policies in place; however, it is still important for libraries to review them and ensure that their employees and board members are familiar with how they work.

## Part 2: Resources

### Articles

- Frank, B. (1994). "Just a bunch of bigots" A case study in the acquisition of controversial material. *Archival Issues*, 19(1), 53-65.

Discusses specifically acquiring controversial material of historical value, and how, despite such material falling within collection policies, it can lead to controversies where a librarian's professional credentials are not valued by the public. There is information on how to deal with the fallout of such controversies, including the idea that ignoring public debate is worse than doing nothing, why and how you should respond to public criticism, and information on dealing with journalists.

- Manzo, K. (2006, September 27). Challenged. *Education Week*, 5-5.

Discusses why materials are challenged by patrons, why it is important to have well-structured policies that address patrons' concerns, and how it is important to follow established policies. The article mentions the importance of having clearly defined steps to allow for challenges to be made and timelines for reacting to challenges.

- McMenemy, D. (2009). Censorship or recklessness? Obligations and legality regarding controversial materials in libraries. *Library Review*, 58(2), 85-88. Retrieved February 7, 2015.

Provides a UK-based perspective on the types of material challenged by patrons, and the importance of providing access to such material. The importance of knowing the legal framework a library exists within is shown by discussing current and historical laws, as well as legal cases that have affected material in libraries.

- Preer, J.(2014). Prepare to Be Challenged! *Library Trends* 62(4), 759-770. The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Uses an example of a complex and messy series of challenges from specific library patrons to discuss the importance of having well established policies for every step of the challenge process (including public forums and private meetings) and ensuring that staff and board members are well educated on said policies and the reasons behind them. Discusses how something seemingly minor, such as access to materials challenge forms, and the wording used on them, can affect how the entire process is perceived by the patron, leading to either better or worse understanding.

- Scales, P. (2013). Challenged: A formal process provides teaching moments. *School Library Journal*, 59(7), 14.

Says that having a formal complaint process for challenged material is important, presents some scenarios and possible solutions to challenges.

- Tsompanakis, S. (2014). A discussion and suggestions on ethical barriers in librarianship: Information privacy, controversial materials, and personal beliefs. *Library Philosophy and Practice*.

Says that policies surrounding challenges are important as they support the library in the face of complaints concerning material in their library, notes that these policies must be applied and followed properly if they are to be of any use, and suggests that there will always be some amount of bias from librarians no matter how fair the policies may be because “librarians are humans and not automatons.” Also states that it is important to remember that no matter how carefully created and followed, policies surrounding challenged material cannot make everybody happy.

### Books and other documents

- Cabeceiras, J. (1982). Responding to Request to Censor. In *The multimedia library: Materials selection and use* (2nd ed., pp. 278-285). New York: Academic Press.

Suggests that librarians should attempt to resolve challenges through discussions about library selection policies without the patron having to create a written complaint. It is the only source that gives the option to “remove only the objectionable parts of the material if feasible,” and suggests that, in response to challenges, a library should avoid publicity and keep a low profile. As this is from a much earlier era, it is probably more valuable for historical purposes than for creating current policies.

- *Guidance on the management of controversial material in public libraries*. (2009). London: Museums, Libraries and Archives Council.

Features appendices of case studies featuring library policies on selection and censorship, and a section on handling complaints, explaining why libraries might make certain material available. Interestingly, states, “Censorship will only be exercised when required by the law,” which indicates that libraries in the UK work within a very different environment.

- Jones, R. (2010, May 22). Controversial Materials in Libraries. Retrieved from February 7, 2015, [http://img.lib.msu.edu/lamp/LAMP\\_Controversial\\_Materials\\_Outline\\_Jones.pdf](http://img.lib.msu.edu/lamp/LAMP_Controversial_Materials_Outline_Jones.pdf)

Offers several reasons why patrons may find material controversial, discusses why library collections include those types of material, and raises the question of whether libraries should have historically valuable material that may be offensive to some users. Also discusses several

administrative issues that can happen due to patron challenges, and was the only source to mention that the security of challenged items may be at risk.

### Library Policies

- Beaufort County Library. (2009, September). Challenged Materials Policy. Retrieved February 7, 2015, from <http://www.beaufortcountylibrary.org/content/challenged-materials-policy>

Public Library. Beaufort, South Carolina. Five branches.

Gives steps for how patrons can submit challenges; how the library will deal with them, including the creation of committees to evaluate material (if necessary); and how patrons may appeal to the library board if unsatisfied with the initial decision. Mentions the importance of creating written reports and recommendations if challenges reach higher levels.

- Free Library of Philadelphia. (n.d.). Reevaluation of Materials. Retrieved February 7, 2015, from <http://www.freelibrary.org/about/materialselection.htm#reevaluation>

Public Library, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Fifty-four branches.

Provides information for patrons on how to make formal requests to challenge material. Links to ALA Library Bill of Rights, ALA Freedom to Read policy, and Free Library of Philadelphia policies concerning material selection, collection policies, and age level guidance.

- MacOdrum Library. (n.d.). Challenged Materials in the Library Policy. Retrieved February 7, 2015, from <https://www.library.carleton.ca/about/policies/challenged-materials-library-policy>

Academic library. Carleton University, Ottawa, Ontario. One branch.

Gives Canadian Library Association Statement on Intellectual Freedom, and provides brief overview of how complaints should be made and dealt with.

- Mead Public Library. (n.d.). Challenged Materials Policy. Retrieved February 7, 2015, from <http://www.meadpl.org/policies/challenges>

Public library. Sheboygan, Wisconsin. One branch.

States that, although the difference between constitutionally protected and unprotected expressions can at times be hard to discern, all attempts to regulate library material, whether from citizens or governments, must be looked at carefully. Provides information on the challenge process, including the requirement that those making complaints must have read, watched, or

viewed the material in full, that they must be residents of the county where the library is located, and that titles will only be reviewed once every five years “unless substantial content changes have been made.”

- Pikes Peak Library District. (n.d.). Challenged Materials Policy. Retrieved February 7, 2015, from <http://ppld.org/challenged-materials-policy>

Public library. El Paso County, Colorado. Sixteen branches.

Provides information to patrons about why the library has made its selections, the procedures for requesting material to be reconsidered, and how the library will progress after the final decision is made to retain or remove the material.

- Ryerson University Library Archives. (2012, April 19). Challenged Material. Retrieved February 7, 2015, from <http://library.ryerson.ca/info/policies/challenged/>

Academic library. Ryerson University, Toronto, Ontario. One branch.

Gives procedures for how challenges of material must be presented to the library, and the steps the library must go through in response. Includes how to create a subcommittee to discuss things with challengers, consult with experts, and give recommendations to the library council.

- Seattle Public Library. (2002, January 22). Selection and Withdrawal of Library Materials. Retrieved February 7, 2015, from <http://www.spl.org/about-the-library/library-use-policies/selection-and-withdrawal-of-library-materials>

Public library. Seattle, Washington. Twenty-seven branches.

Provides information on the objectives of the collection, the selection policy, policies regarding access to the collection, constitutional protection (including that any material that is found to not be constitutionally protected will be removed from the collection), the collection review procedure, and how the withdrawal of materials will be handled.

- Strathmore Library. (n.d.). Challenged Materials. Retrieved February 7, 2015, from <http://www.strathmorelibrary.ca/content/challenged-materials>

Public library. Strathmore, Alberta. One branch.

States why a library might feature material an individual may not like, but also why they should respect others' right to access that material. Provides information about how to make a challenge, how the challenge will be dealt with, and links to the Canadian Library Association's Statement of Intellectual Freedom.

- Vancouver Public Library. (2008, September 24). Collection Development Policy. Retrieved February 7, 2015, from [http://www.vpl.ca/about/details/collection\\_development\\_policy](http://www.vpl.ca/about/details/collection_development_policy)

Public library. Vancouver, British Columbia. Twenty-two branches.

Provides limited information on how a request for “Reconsideration of Library Materials” may be made, and states that the library will review any material that is challenged in this way.

- Wasco County Library Service District. (n.d.). Challenged Materials. Retrieved February 7, 2015, from <http://www.wasco.plinkit.org/about-us/library-policies/challenged-materials.html>. **No longer online.**

Public library. Wasco County, Oregon. Three branches.

States how complaints regarding material need to be made (including author, title, and page numbers of material objected to, and reason for objection), provides information on how patrons who are not satisfied with initial response from the library can present to the library board, and how the board will determine if the material meets the library’s criteria for inclusion. Also states that the “presence of a book or other material in the collection shall not constitute an approval or endorsement of the views contained in it.”

- Western Kentucky University Libraries. (2014, February 26). Challenged Material Statement regarding Censorship/Intellectual Freedom. Retrieved February 7, 2015, from <http://www.wku.edu/library/deansoffice/policiesandprocedures/challengedmaterials.php>

Academic library. Bowling Green, Kentucky. Seven locations.

Provides information on how challenges to material are dealt with, how committees to deal with challenges will be created and operate, and how the committee’s job is to consider the value of the material in the context of the library collection as a whole, and not just the concerns of the challenger.

### **Professional Organizations and Other Websites**

- The American Library Association Intellectual Freedom Committee. (2000, November 17). Dealing with Concerns about Library Resources. Retrieved from <http://www.ala.org/bbooks/challengedmaterials/preparation/dealing-concerns>

Discusses the importance of having a collection policy, a service policy, a clearly defined complaints process (including steps for staff to follow while dealing with a complaint), staff training in regards to book challenges, communication with outside support groups and

individuals, and staying in touch with the media. Suggests that libraries should be aware of rights, laws, and local legislation.

- The American Library Association Intellectual Freedom Committee. (1995, June 27). Sample Request for Reconsideration of Library Resources. Retrieved from <http://www.ala.org/bbooks/challengedmaterials/support/samplerconsideration>

Gives an example of what a material challenge form can look like, and information that can be included.

- The Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC). (n.d.). Suggested Steps to Take When Materials Are Challenged. Retrieved February 7, 2015, from <http://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/freedom/steps.asp>

States that every challenge will be different, and that there are a large number of different factors that can influence both the reasons for the challenge, and the way a library reacts. Provides suggested steps for dealing with challenges to material, including reviewing the complaint, reviewing selection policy, organizing discussions with staff, and gathering resources in order to explain why a resource is in the library.

- Cruz, R. (2014, February 12). Be Prepared with a Challenged Materials Policy. Retrieved February 7, 2015, from <http://publiclibrariesonline.org/2014/02/be-prepared-with-a-challenged-materials-policy/>

States the importance of working with a library's board when creating a challenged materials policy, both to create a good policy but also to ensure that the board is aware of the policy, why it exists, and why material is selected for the library. Suggests that it is important for a library to have a specific library employee who is responsible for dealing with patron challenges, and for other employees to know who that person is.

- Freedom to Read Week. (1997, February 5). Position Statement. Retrieved February 7, 2015, from <http://www.freedomtoread.ca/who-we-are/position-statement/>

Provides information on how freedom of expression is a fundamental right of Canadians and that only the courts have the legal right to restrict access to reading material. Links to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

- Lanier, G. (n.d.). Conducting a challenge hearing. Retrieved February 7, 2015, from <http://www.ala.org/bbooks/challengedmaterials/support/hearing>

Suggests that challenge hearings can be the weak link in library policy, stresses the importance of ensuring that board members are familiar with library policies regarding collections if they are required to be present at such an event, and provides some suggestions for guidelines (speaker

lists, time limits, etc.) to ensure such meetings run smoothly. Discusses the importance of being transparent about hearings, meetings, and policies; the value in being in contact with people who will speak about the importance of large varieties of material being available in libraries; and how the library should be media savvy and prepare press releases concerning challenges and hearings.

- The Office for Intellectual Freedom of the American Library Association. (n.d.). Intellectual Freedom Manual. Retrieved February 7, 2015, from <http://www.ifmanual.org/>

Provides an overview of intellectual freedom with regards to libraries, including the library bill of rights and legal rights. Provides material for creating collection development policies and guidelines to prepare and respond to challenges to material.

- The Office for Intellectual Freedom of the American Library Association. (1999). Strategies and Tips for Dealing with Challenges to Library Materials. Retrieved from <http://www.ala.org/bbooks/challengedmaterials/support/strategies>

Stresses the importance of giving staff training in how to deal with challenges to material and library policies. Provides tips for librarians, directors, and board members on how to deal with patrons and the media in regards to challenges, including reaching out to the community to let them know why the library has the policies it does, ensuring those policies are up to date and fit within legal frameworks, and the importance of both internal and external communication.

- The Office for Intellectual Freedom of the American Library Association. (1999, October). Workbook for Selection Policy Writing. Retrieved from <http://www.ala.org/bbooks/challengedmaterials/preparation/workbook-selection-policy-writing>

Provides information on creating a selection policy for a library, including objections, responsibility, criteria, selection procedure, challenges, and controversial material. Features a full sample policy of "Procedures for Dealing with Challenged Materials."

- Pateman, J. (2013, March 13). Management of controversial material in public libraries. Retrieved February 7, 2015, from <http://libr.org/isc/management-of-controversial-material-in-public-libraries-by-john-pateman/>

Discusses a consultation regarding a document created by the UK Museums, Libraries and Archives Council about controversial material in libraries and how many libraries did not feel it adequately met their needs.

- Wilkie, S. (2010, January 6). Guidance on the management of controversial material in public libraries. Retrieved February 7, 2015, from <http://www.slideshare.net/toonsarah/guidance-on-the-management-of-controversial-material-in-public-libraries>

States that libraries have a duty to provide comprehensive service to the public, but must still be accountable to their communities. Discusses the importance of a library having policies about their policies, so that they can keep their policies up to date, make sure they are publicly available, that their staff have received training regarding them, and so forth.

*Matthew Murray is a 2015 graduate of UBC's School of Library, Archival, and Information Studies. He is interested in makerspaces, zines, comics, and gaming in libraries.*

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