

Intellectual Freedom: Where we are and how we got there

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Conference Abstract: Panelists will discuss intellectual freedom challenges faced by libraries in recent years and successful strategies used to defuse such challenges. The presentations will be based on actual, not hypothetical, events, and will focus mostly on challenges arising from sexual, social, and political controversies. Questions from the audience will be welcome.

[Program Presentation Slides](#) (in .pdf format)

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History of Intellectual Freedom and Libraries

In August 2004, I began my career as a university librarian with a number of misconceptions, one of which involved the challenges to intellectual freedom within the realm of libraries. At that time, I maintained the assumption that libraries in higher education (namely colleges and universities) confronted intellectual freedom in terms of specific provisions in the USA PATRIOT Act and ongoing technological developments. I further assumed that other libraries (elementary, high school and public) faced their own separate intellectual freedom issues with emphases on materials, displays, and internet filtering. I concluded that between these two groups the only shared aspect of intellectual freedom was one of privacy. However, through university experience and my involvement with the Alabama Library Association's Intellectual Freedom Committee, I have come to

realize academic and public libraries are facing the same intellectual freedom challenges.

When invited to participate in a panel discussion at the 2006 SELA conference, I proposed to interview and survey academic librarians throughout the southeastern United States to see what intellectual freedom issues were affecting them. Prior to the construction of the survey, I began to look into the history of intellectual freedom in terms of the American Library Association (ALA). This investigation led to a robust wealth of information on challenges to intellectual freedom, both in terms of patron perceptions and within the profession itself.

I constructed the following very basic timeline to notate some major ALA events, inception to present, involving intellectual freedom ([Berninghausen](#) 1975; [Lord](#) 2005; [Samek](#) 2000).

ALA and IF History

1876: The American Library Association is founded.

1934: ALA issues its first formal protest against the banning of a specific publication.

1939: ALA adopts a policy statement on intellectual freedom.

1946: ALA adopts a policy statement linking intellectual freedom and tenure in the library profession.

1948: ALA officially adopts the [Library Bill of Rights](#).

1953: ALA issues the [Freedom to Read Statement](#).

1971: ALA approves a policy on library record confidentiality.

1990: ALA adopts the [Freedom to View statement](#).

1991: ALA's first intellectual freedom stance on an international issue.

1996/7: Communications Decency Act (CDA).

2000: Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA).

2001: USA PATRIOT Act.

One of the research highlights not noted on the timeline includes a statement by the 1908 ALA president: “Books that distinctly commend what is wrong and teach how to sin....are increasingly popular.... Thank heaven they do not tempt the librarian” ([Lord](#) 2005, 33).

Two themes arise in the way in which intellectual freedom issues seem to affect librarians and ALA. The first evokes the librarian in a traditional provisionary mode of defending access to information. This is exemplified throughout ALA’s history, beginning in 1934 with its first stance on the banning of a publication (which didn’t even belong to a library) ([Lord](#) 2005). These sorts of actions can be traced through the present, including later policies and the production of annual challenge and banned book lists.

The second evokes the librarian in the mode of selecting information for inclusion within a collection. The 1960s and 1970s produced discussions within the profession about social responsibilities, both in terms of statements endorsed by ALA as well as selection tools librarians use to provide guidance for purchase and access to mainstream media ([Samek](#) 2000).

The Survey

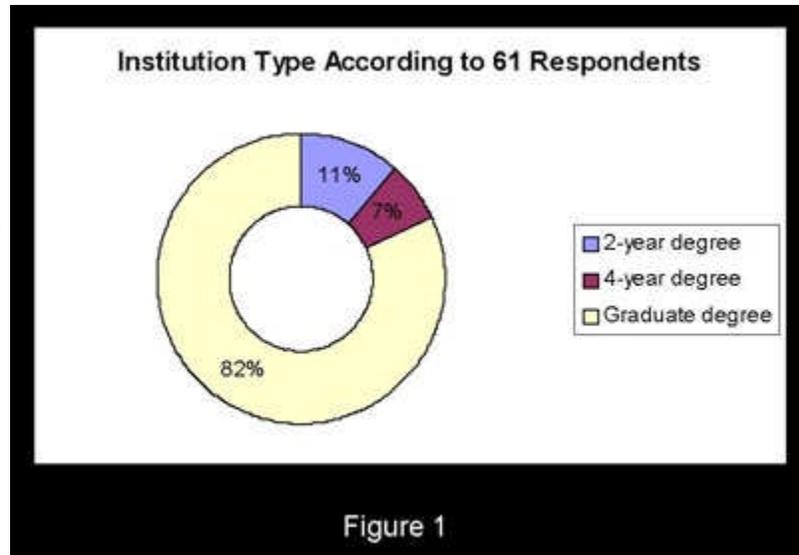
The survey I conducted (see [Appendix](#)) attempted to reflect these research findings. The survey includes questions regarding policies and challenges in addition to questions surrounding librarians’ social responsibility.

Purpose:

Research current intellectual freedom issues and their affects upon academic librarians in the southeastern region today.

Environment:

The survey was distributed to academic librarians via the SELA listserv (including the states of Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia).



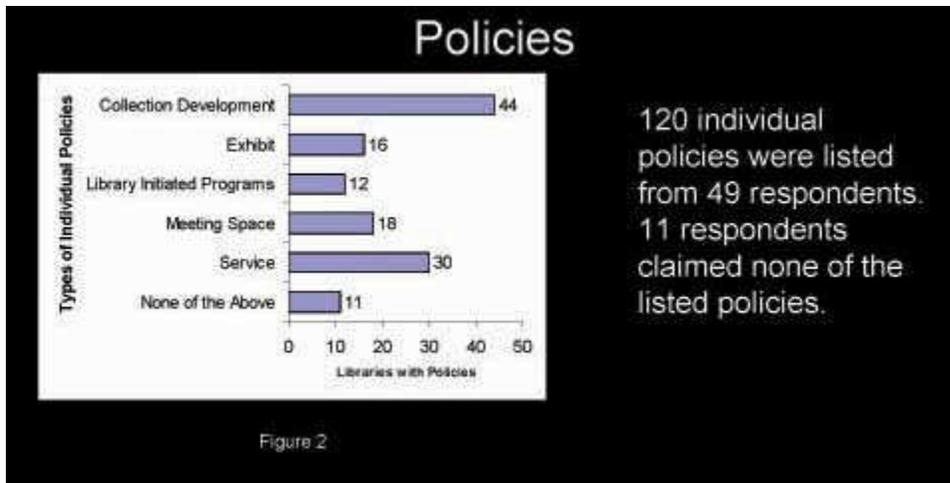
The survey remained open from February 15th - February 25th, 2006.

I had between 59 and 61 responses for each question.

The majority of respondents were from public, graduate degree-granting universities (See Figure 1).

Policies:

The questionnaire asked about policies regarding collection development, exhibits, library-initiated programs, meeting space, and service. Results indicated seventy-three percent of all institutions had a collection development policy (See Figure 2). Public institutions had a higher percentage of policies in place.

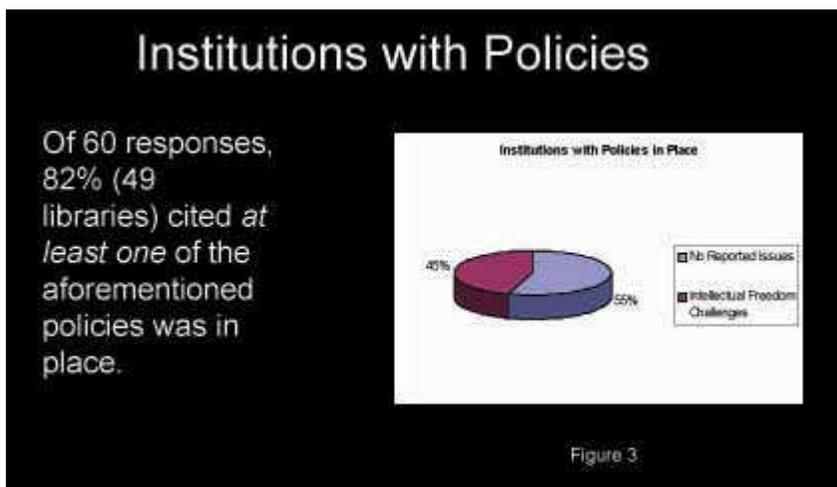


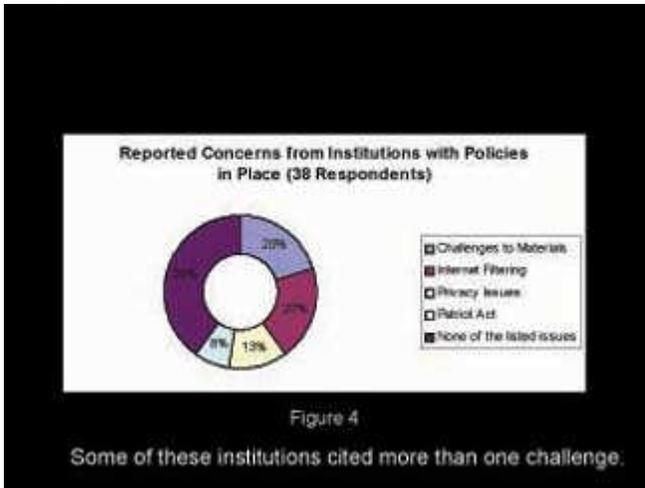
Challenges:

Private institutions reported 20% more challenges to material within their collections and more filtering issues. Public institutions cited more privacy concerns.

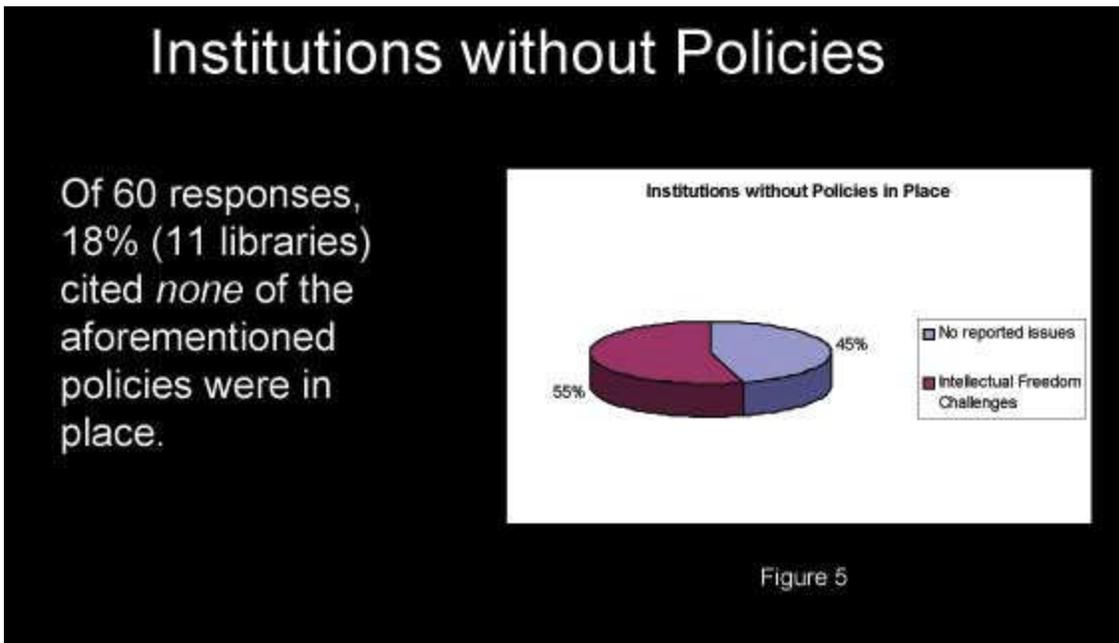
Combining Policy and Challenge Information:

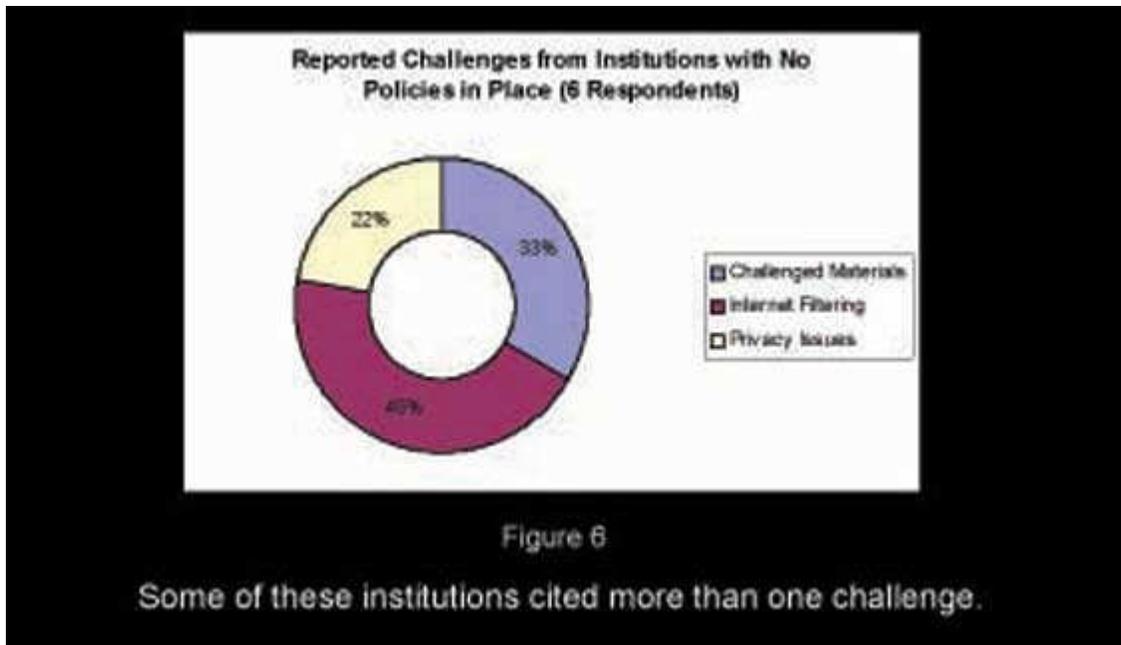
In combining policy and challenge information, 82% (49 respondents) cited *at least one* of the aforementioned policies in place. From these respondents 45% claimed to have had intellectual freedom challenges (See Figures 3 and 4).





Of the eleven respondents (18%) that cited none of the mentioned policies in place, 55% claimed intellectual freedom challenges (See Figures 5 and 6).





Although it appears to be better to have policies in place, I didn't feel as if the survey generated enough responses from institutions without policies to depict concrete tendencies one way or another.

Social Responsibilities:

One encouraging aspect of the survey was only 5% of the respondents claimed to have felt coerced into removing material from their collections. A different 5% of librarians surveyed stated they had avoided purchasing materials due to potential controversial nature. Note that all of the latter respondents were from private institutions.

Seventy-five percent of librarians claimed to be familiar with the history of the American Library Association in terms of intellectual freedom and the resources provided by ALA.

Conclusions:

Academic librarians are facing the same intellectual freedom issues as elementary, high school and public librarians. Further investigation could produce more comprehensive results pertaining to institutions without policies. In the meantime, librarians need to continue discussing methods for dealing with challenges.

Appendix:

Academic Librarians Intellectual Freedom Challenges Questionnaire

1. The institution I'm employed by is
 - a. _____ Private
 - b. _____ Public
2. The institution I'm employed by is
 - a. _____ 2 year degree granting
 - b. _____ 4 year degree granting
 - c. _____ University graduate degree granting
3. Do you consider yourself to be familiar with the ALA's history regarding intellectual freedom?

YES _____ NO _____
4. Are you aware of Intellectual Freedom resources the ALA currently provides?

YES _____ NO _____
5. Does your library have policies to deal with challenges?
(Please mark all that apply.)
Collection Development Policy _____
Exhibit Space Policy _____
Meeting Space Policy _____
Library-Initiated Programs _____
Service Policy _____
6. Which Intellectual Freedom issue(s) have affected you as a librarian in an academic institution? (Please mark all that apply.)

- a. ____ Challenges to material(s) within the collection
 - b. ____ Provisions of the Patriot Act
 - c. ____ Internet Filtering
 - d. ____ Privacy Issues (RFID, REAL ID, professors asking to see reserve circ records to monitor student progress, tenure committees asking for a colleague's circulation records)
7. Have you ever avoided purchasing material due to potential controversial nature?
YES ____ NO ____
8. Have you felt coerced into removing material from the collection after it was challenged?
YES ____ NO ____

References

[Berninghausen](#), David K. 1975. *Flight from Reason: Essays on Intellectual Freedom in the Academy, Press, and the Library*. Chicago: American Library Association

[Lord](#), Catherine. 2005. *Defending Access with Confidence: A Practical Workshop on Intellectual Freedom*. Chicago: Public Library Association.

[Samek](#), Toni. 2000. *Intellectual Freedom and Social Responsibility in American Librarianship, 1967-1974*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Co.