



Should Public Libraries be “Safe Spaces”?

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This article looks at debates about meeting room spaces and related issues. It argues that public libraries should not deny services to patrons based on their political viewpoints.

For years, the Foundation for Individuals Rights in Education (FIRE) has kept a database of disinvitation attempts at colleges and universities in the United States. A disinvitation attempt occurs when members of a campus community demand that an invited speaker not be allowed to speak. It also occurs when members prevent a speaker from speaking. Crucially, the database does not include protests against speakers. For example, if students stood outside of their auditorium with an “Erik Prince is a Murderer” sign, they would not be included. If these same students piled chairs onto the stage where Prince was supposed to speak, they would be included. From Prince to Mike Pence and Ben Shapiro, the number of disinvitation attempts has increased in the past few years.

At the same time, right wing pundits and politicians draw attention to these attempts. For example, *Tucker Carlson Tonight*, *Hannity*, and other television shows devote segments to liberals who try to prevent conservatives from speaking and teaching on campus. Likewise, former President Trump and other politicians want to discontinue funding for higher education. As Trump explains, “if [institutions of higher education] want our dollars and we give them by the billions, they’ve got to allow people to speak” (quoted in Moses 2019). At the state level, a number of legislators, especially those associated with the Goldwater Institute, threaten to cut funding to colleges and universities that violate the First Amendment. In short, the right has used the disinvitation era to further

a decades-long project to defund higher education in the United States.

The effects of this outrage industrial complex—in which the right uses liberal outrage against individuals to fuel conservative outrage against public institutions—is apparent in a recent report published by the Pew Research Center (2019). According to the report, Republicans’ views of colleges and universities were consistent from 2012 to 2015. Yet their views declined from 2015 on. During this period, the share of Republicans and independents who lean Republican who feel colleges and universities have a negative effect on the country rose from 37 percent to 59 percent. Three-quarters of these respondents said a major reason higher education is going in the wrong



direction is because there is “too much concern about protecting students from views they might find offensive.” Even if one retains an argument for protecting individuals from the purported harm of hearing viewpoints they dislike, there seems to be no argument if the goal is to build bipartisan support for higher education.

In this context, it is disheartening to see librarians follow the lead of liberals on campus. As public institutions, public libraries depend on public funds. They also have to adhere to the First Amendment. Yet many librarians want to turn public libraries into “safe spaces.” That is, spaces safe from the conservative viewpoints they dislike. For example, *American Libraries*—the flagship magazine of the American Library Association (ALA)—recently published an article titled “When Speech Isn’t Free.” In the article, librarian Meredith Farkas (2020) argues that “hate speech inhibits free speech because it effectively prevents others from speaking.” According to Farkas, librarians must create environments where everyone has “psychological safety.” In other words, these should be environments where organizations such as the Women’s Liberation Front (WoLF), an organization that denies the existence of transgender people, are not allowed to meet. Indeed, Farkas disagrees with the librarians at Seattle Public Library who allowed this organization to use one of their public meeting rooms in 2020.

The *American Libraries* article is just one of many shots fired in the ongoing battle to redefine the role of public libraries in the United States. Of note, the ALA came under fire in 2018 when it explained to its members that libraries “cannot exclude religious, social, civic, partisan political, or hate groups from discussing their activities in the same facilities.” This provoked a liberal backlash, in which their statement was described as “milquetoast hands-off garbage centrism” (Vachoff quoted in Schaub 2018). In response to this criticism, James LaRue, director of ALA’s Office for Intellectual Freedom, had to remind librarians of the laws that circumscribe their profession. “A publicly funded library is not obligated to provide meeting room space to the public, but, if it chooses to do so, under law cannot discriminate or deny access based upon the viewpoint of speakers or the content of their speech.” The librarians at Seattle Public Library took the same position after they consulted legal experts.

Some of the liberals who want to restrict access to public libraries are right. For starters, trans people, people of color, and other people with historically marginalized identities have faced and continue to face intolerance and discrimination within public institutions. At a moment when outreach remains a central project within public

libraries, it will be harder to reach out to those individuals who do not feel welcome. Certainly, it is easier to present the library as a place for everyone when WoLF, the Proud Boys, or Klansmen are not holding a meeting down the hall. In plain English, the free speech absolutist position stands to disproportionately marginalize library patrons who are already marginalized in other areas of public life.

However, all patrons have a legal right to be wrong. More to the point, much of what Farkas and other librarians call “hate speech” is speech shared by mainstream conservatives, liberals, and moderates. For example, when *New York Times* bestselling author Ben Shapiro (2017) says “the idea that sex or gender are malleable is not true,” his views are right in line with WoLF and a significant portion of the American public. In the same vein, *New York Times* bestselling author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichi and other liberals have their own controversial viewpoints about trans people. Like Nadine Strossen (2020), the former president of the American Civil Liberties Union, I think that the best response to bad speech is better speech—not censorship. At a moment when the coronavirus pandemic continues to push through some of the most regressive public budgets in decades, and widespread polarization continues to erode support for public institutions, I also think that it is the response best suited to secure the broad, bipartisan support that public libraries depend upon.

These points aside, if librarians are able to restrict the rights of Americans who share the views of everyone from Shapiro to Adichi and former President Trump—whose repugnant views of LGBTQ people could not be clearer—out of concerns for “psychological safety,” it is not irrational to believe that some librarians will then want to restrict access to their books. As Keith E. Whittington (2018) reflects in *Speak Freely: Why Universities Must Defend Free Speech*, “if students should not be exposed to Ann Coulter or Charles Murray in a campus auditorium, there seems to be no more reason why they should be exposed to their books in the [campus] library” (92). Likewise, if public librarians do not believe their patrons should be exposed to these people in a library meeting room, there seems to be no more reason why they should be exposed to their books in a public library. In fact, one [public library employee](#) was recently fired for removing and then burning books by conservative authors, including Ann Coulter (Associated Press 2020). Allegedly, he was just “weeding.” But, as a general rule, libraries do not weed recent *New York Times* bestsellers.

Ultimately, if librarians want to create more inclusive spaces, they should not exclude the patrons with whom they disagree. They certainly should not remove books



that they dislike. As an alternative to censorship, they should stand behind the Library Bill of Rights. Adopted in 1939, this bill affirms that meeting rooms should be available “regardless of the beliefs or affiliations of individuals or groups requesting their use,” at the same time “materials should not be proscribed or removed because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval” (American Library Association 2021).

That said, librarians should also promote programs that support those who face discrimination. For example, some librarians invite drag queens to their libraries to lead Drag Queen Story Hour (2020). These events provide “glamorous, positive, and unabashedly queer role models” to children. To be sure, these story times often provoke calls for censorship from conservative patrons and legislators. For example, a recent Minnesota bill proposed to defund libraries by 100 percent if they allowed Drag Queen Story Hour (Gruenhagen et al. 2020). Another [bill](#) in Missouri proposed to jail librarians for allowing minors to access “[age-inappropriate](#)” material dealing with sexuality (Baker 2020; Kaur 2020). Last month, Indiana senator Jim Tomes promoted his own bill to jail public librarians who circulate “[harmful](#)” material (Shrum 2021).

The failure of all three bills illustrates the effectiveness of petitions, letter writing campaigns, and other forms of counter speech. It also reiterates the need to oppose all forms of censorship in public libraries. To put the matter bluntly, if progressive librarians promote a culture where patrons can be denied services because of their beliefs, it is not improbable that this will have a backfire effect. Just as many campus speech policies, social media speech policies, and European “hate speech” laws were instituted to protect historically marginalized people, many of these policies and laws were then used to target these

same people. The targeted include antiracists, feminists, and LGBTQIA+ activists. In a culture of censorship, the power to censor belongs to whoever happens to be in power at any given moment.

Bills, policies, and laws aside, we have already seen versions of this in the de facto decisions of individual libraries. Earlier this year, the Seymour branch of the Jackson County Public Library in Indiana permanently banned a sixty-eight-year-old patron, who cannot afford internet access, because he left an anti-Trump poem in a basket on the circulation desk. The poem was meant for one of his friends who is an employee. Apparently, another employee found it. When asked about the decision to ban this senior citizen for life, the circulation manager responded, “we don’t do politics at the library” (quoted in Caplan 2021). Whereas some public librarians have little tolerance for the political views of WoLF, other librarians have little tolerance for the political views of liberals. In both cases, people might rightfully wonder why their tax dollars support what looks like just another partisan institution.

As a library patron who has lived in red states, the last thing I want to do is promote a culture where patrons can be denied public services because of their views. As a library patron who now lives in a blue state, my position has not changed. I hope that those who value both intellectual freedom and the rights of patrons will agree. Given the failed attempts to censor German Nazis in the 1920s and 1930s (Strossen 2020, 136), and the publicity that these attempts gave their ascendant movement, I really hope that librarians, activists, and other people committed to a more just world will agree. To reiterate the argument one last time, the best way to resist bad speech is with better speech—not censorship.

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Nominations Invited for Annual Downs Intellectual Freedom Award

The School of Information Sciences at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign seeks nominations for the 2021 Robert B. Downs Intellectual Freedom Award. The deadline for nominations is March 15, 2022. The award is [cosponsored by SAGE Publishing](#).

Given annually, the award acknowledges individuals or groups who have furthered the cause of intellectual freedom, particularly as it impacts libraries and information centers and the dissemination of ideas. Granted to those who have resisted censorship or efforts to abridge the freedom of individuals to read or view materials of their choice or to hear or express ideas, the award may be in recognition of a particular action or a long-term interest in and dedication to the cause of intellectual freedom.

The [Downs Award](#) was established in 1969 by the iSchool's faculty to honor Dean Emeritus Robert B. Downs, a champion of intellectual freedom, on the occasion of his twenty-fifth anniversary as director of the School.

Previous winners have included Amy Dodson (2020), former director of the Douglas County Public Library, Nevada, for supporting equity, diversity, and inclusion as part of the library's mission and service; the Education Justice Project (2019) for its defense of the First

Amendment rights of incarcerated individuals; the Iowa Library Association (2018) for taking a leadership role in several highly visible challenges to intellectual freedom; and the Kansas City Public Library (2017) for its defense of a library patron's First Amendment rights.

SAGE Publishing provides an honorarium to the Downs Intellectual Freedom Award recipient and cohosts the reception held in honor of the recipient. The reception and award ceremony for the 2021 recipient will take place in June 2022 at the American Library Association Annual Conference.

Letters of nomination and documentation about the nominee should be sent by March 15, 2022, to Associate Professor Terry Weech, chair of the Nominations Selection Committee, either by email at weech@illinois.edu with a copy to ischool-dean@illinois.edu, or in paper form to:

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Please email any questions to Associate Professor Terry Weech.