



Intellectual Freedom Survey Report

2024

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PURPOSE

The Intellectual Freedom Committee is responsible for safeguarding and promoting intellectual freedom within the Wisconsin Library Association (WLA) and the Wisconsin library community. The committee's charge includes collecting annual data via annual surveys. The 2024 Intellectual Freedom Survey was a collaboration between the WLA Intellectual Freedom Committee and Wisconsin Educational Media & Technology Association's (WEMTA). The goal of the collaboration is to reach more school library professionals and increase communication between our organizations for better staff support and advocacy.

The 2024 survey was open for two weeks, from the end of September to early October. It was sent out through multiple channels to maximize participation from across the library spectrum. The channels included: Wisconsin Library Association (WLA), Wisconsin Educational Media & Technology Association's (WEMTA) Intellectual Freedom group, the Council of UW Libraries (CUWL), and through the Wisconsin Public Library email list.

The purpose of this data collection is to assess the state of intellectual freedom in Wisconsin as reported by library staff. In addition to challenge data, the survey assessed the mental and emotional burden on library staff due to the rise in and the inflammatory nature of current censorship challenges statewide. Based on feedback from the 2023 survey participants, the committee changed or omitted several questions to gather more relevant data. We also changed the scale of how participants rate their experiences from a 0-10 scale (2023) to a Strongly Agree - Strongly Disagree scale (2024). The purpose of the change was to better define answer choices so participants had more confidence in their answers (as opposed to a subjective number scale with no attached definitions). When possible, data from both surveys are compared for better analysis though in some cases the change in scale makes this difficult to assess.

Lastly, the committee views the survey as an opportunity to hear what support library staff members are looking for and give an opportunity to share resources with one another. The following report breaks down the survey results into the following categories: how the current climate affects library work, training and support, challenge breakdown, suggestions, and what's next. Collected responses include both quantitative data and qualitative, open-ended responses from library staff of all positions. Responses were collected anonymously, with only broad library type included for demographic purposes.

LIBRARY TYPE

The 2024 Intellectual Freedom survey had 274 participants.

Of those 274 participants:

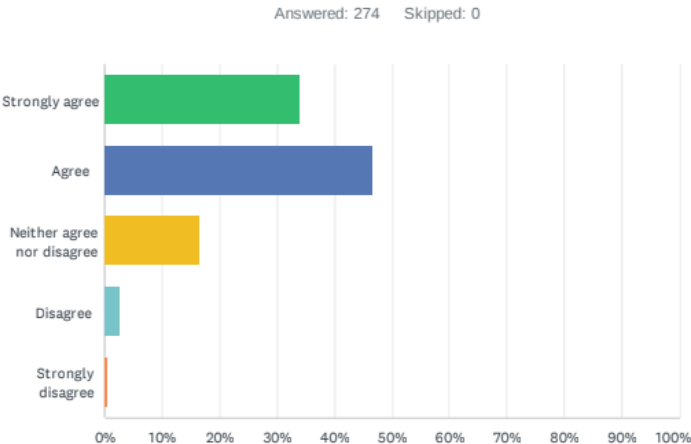
- 166 (61%) were public library staff
- 67 (25%) were school library staff
- 37 (14%) were academic library staff
- 3 (1%) were special library staff

Compared to 2023, the 2024 survey had 4 more total participants. The biggest difference was the total number of school library staff participants, which jumped from 3% in 2023 to 25% in 2024. This increase in school library participation was a direct result of our collaboration with WEMTA and the ability to directly reach more of their members.

LIBRARY SUPPORT

Question 5: My library/school district has strong support from my community.

All responses:



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Strongly agree	33.94% 93
Agree	46.72% 128
Neither agree nor disagree	16.42% 45
Disagree	2.55% 7
Strongly disagree	0.36% 1
TOTAL	274

Data Takeaway: 81% of participants responded either “Strongly Agree” or “Agree” that their library has strong support from their community, which is an increase from the 2023 survey , which was an average response of 7/10 (roughly 70%).

Comments Summary

Public Libraries: Many public library staff responded that though they feel the library has strong support from community members, they did not have strong support (or sometimes any real support) from library board members and local politicians. This disparity often means a lack of funding and understanding libraries bring to communities. Groups that are actively seeking to censor materials and programs are present, but the minority.

School Libraries: School library staff commented that many people support the libraries but are unaware of the larger issues happening at the local government and state level. Some school staff are alarmed that the administration has pulled books and materials without warning or discussion. Most say that they hear criticism and verbal challenges, but they have not made any official challenges.

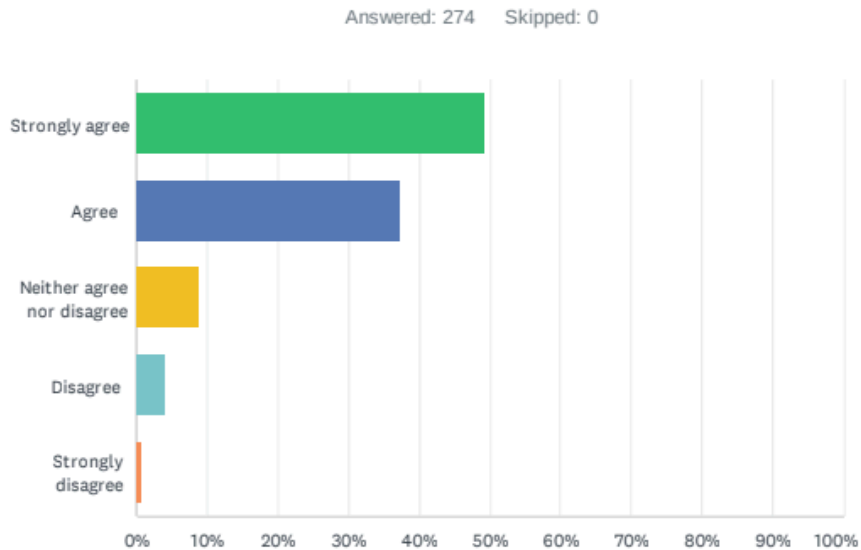
Academic Libraries: Academic library staff felt that they had strong support from students, staff, and campus administrators. Budget cuts were the largest concern among university staff.

Special Libraries: A participant noted that the community seemed eager to show support but limitations made it difficult.

SUPPORT OF ADMINISTRATION

Question 6: I feel my library has the support of my organization's administration.

All responses:



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Strongly agree	49.27%	135
Agree	37.23%	102
Neither agree nor disagree	8.76%	24
Disagree	4.01%	11
Strongly disagree	0.73%	2
TOTAL		274

Data Takeaway: 86% of participants either “Strongly Agreed” or “Agreed” that they had support from their organization’s administration.

Comments Summary

Public Libraries: Comments from public library staff were split. Some voiced that they were confident in the library administration and the support they would receive in the event of an intellectual freedom challenge. Others commented on the lack of support at the local government level, library board members, and a lack of understanding of the library mission at the administration level.

School Libraries: Overall, school library staff were confident in the support of their principals. Others commented that administration at district levels verbally supported libraries, but that did

not often translate into action. There was also concern about the lack of staffing for school libraries in districts.

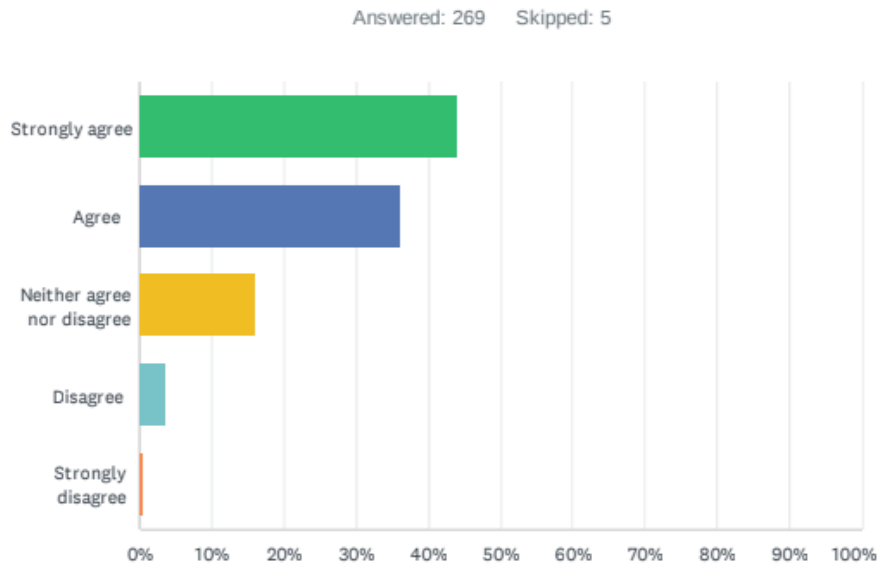
Academic Libraries: Though academic library staff feel that their administration supports them, the state of university budgets means cuts will continue.

Special Libraries: A participant noted that there were many restrictions placed on them and they did not have a budget.

BOARD SUPPORT

Question 7: I feel my library has the support of my organization's board.

All responses:



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Strongly agree	43.87%	118
Agree	36.06%	97
Neither agree nor disagree	15.99%	43
Disagree	3.72%	10
Strongly disagree	0.37%	1
TOTAL		269

Data Takeaway: 80% of participants responded either “Strongly Agree” or “Agree” that their library had the support of their organization’s board.

Comment Summary

Public Libraries: There were many strong, mixed responses. Some library staff reported a very supportive board or that at least the majority of board members were supportive of the library’s mission. Others reported boards that did not seem to understand the mission of the library or were outright hostile and working against intellectual freedom. Some commented that the local board was supportive but the county board was not. Comments were also made that board members did not seem to understand or care about the library’s mission and were not library users/supporters.

School Libraries: Many library staff felt their boards were divided, with some members very supportive and others that were vocal against libraries. One commented that they “don’t understand the impact of the decisions they make.”

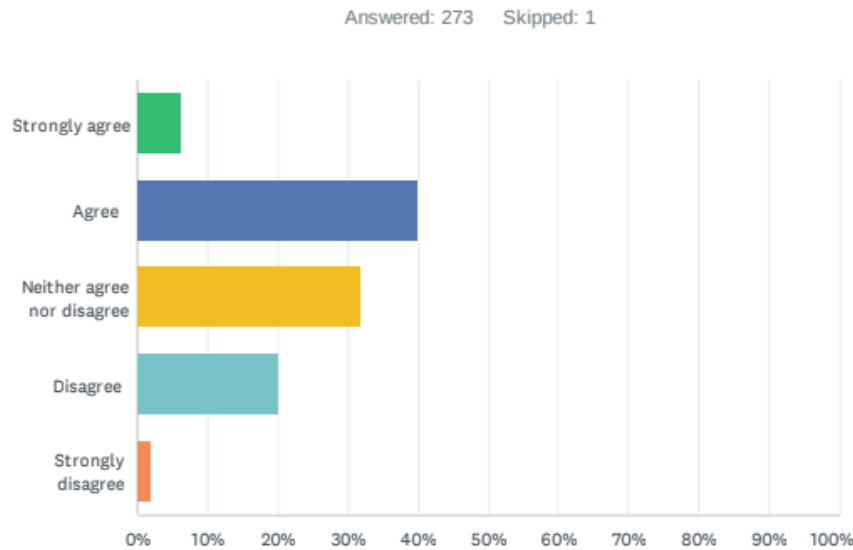
Academic Libraries: Academic staff noted that they are not subjected to a board of trustees.

Special Libraries: No comment.

FUTURE OF INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM IN WISCONSIN

Question 8: I feel positive about the future of intellectual freedom in Wisconsin.

All responses:



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Strongly agree	6.23%	17
Agree	39.93%	109
Neither agree nor disagree	31.87%	87
Disagree	20.15%	55
Strongly disagree	1.83%	5
TOTAL		273

Data Takeaway: Overall just under a third of all respondents replied “Neither agree or disagree,” and this largely is reflected in the response by individual library type, which also saw roughly a third (give or take a few percentage points) reply the same. (Special and Uncategorized were the exceptions.)

Comments Summary

Academic Libraries: Most of those who commented felt it was hard to feel positive given what has been happening in Wisconsin school and public libraries (although one noted it depends on where in the state one is), and the way politics have impacted higher education. One noted they feel positive about intellectual freedom in academic libraries in Wisconsin, but not overall because of what’s been happening in public and school libraries.

Public Libraries: Those who commented were largely split between feeling/hoping that we are seeing or will see a shift away from the recent intensity of complaints and challenges, and worry about the overall increase in censorship attempts in recent years and the impact on intellectual freedom and on individual libraries and communities. Several cited the 2024 presidential election (which had yet to be decided when the survey was answered) as a potential factor in the future of intellectual freedom. One commenter summed up the duality represented in responses, stating, “I feel anxious about the future of intellectual freedom in the country as a whole and Wisconsin. I am hopeful, though, that enough librarians and like-minded folks will stand up for our rights. But we are in a precarious situation.”

School Libraries: Comments largely reflected uncertainty and worry, including the potential impact of the 2024 presidential election. A few noted specific examples that make it hard to feel positive (e.g., preemptive removal of materials by administrators, knee-jerk reaction by districts to a complaint, national groups making it easier for complaints to be made by providing information about books). On the positive side, even with unease, some fine optimism in librarians and libraries becoming better prepared to handle complaints and challenges. As one commenter noted, “I am concerned for any traction gained by right-wing groups who aim to remove books from shelves and ban books from libraries. I have not dealt with a book ban directly, but I do feel a bit nervous about it. That said, I am also strengthened by the great things librarians and groups are doing to combat book banning.”

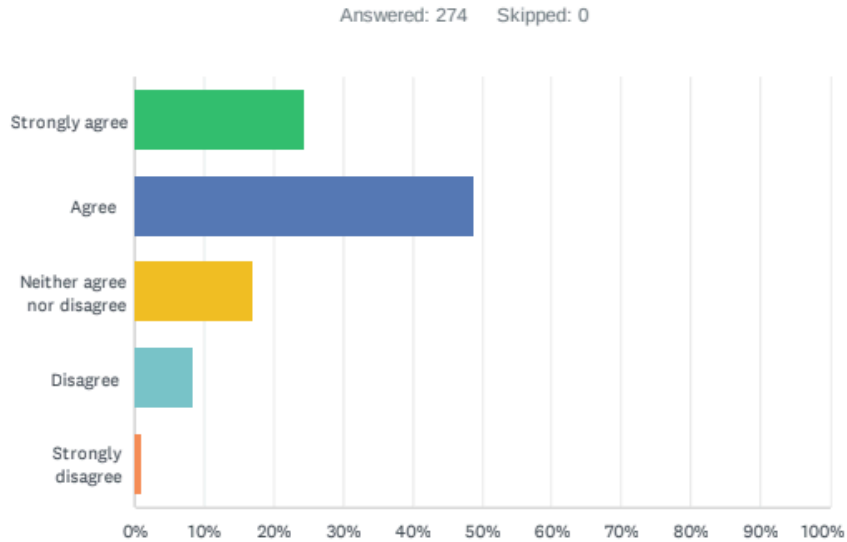
Special Libraries: The one commenter noted, “I think more things are being restricted/banned and it is more difficult to get funding.”

Uncategorized: No comment.

IMPACT OF POLITICAL CLIMATE

Question 9: The current political climate has affected how I feel about my job.

All responses:



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Strongly agree	24.45%	67
Agree	48.91%	134
Neither agree nor disagree	17.15%	47
Disagree	8.39%	23
Strongly disagree	1.09%	3
TOTAL		274

Data takeaway: The percentage of school library respondents who strongly agree or agree is 85%, which is more than 10% higher than the total for these two responses for the survey as a whole (73.41).

Comments Summary

Academic Libraries: Comments addressed the politicization of funding for their libraries and staff, and the fact that libraries and librarians are more important than ever for distinguishing reliable from unreliable information, and appreciation and sympathy for colleagues in other types of libraries facing direct scrutiny re. challenges and attacks.

Public libraries: Those who provided comments ranged from feeling proud of the work of libraries, to secure in terms of local support, to worry, fear and feeling personally unsafe. Some wished politics could stay out of library work, including several who felt that librarians themselves are being too political in their work. A few talked about the serious impact of the

stress they experienced going through intense scrutiny and personal attacks during complaints and challenges, and/or that they have contemplated leaving the profession because of the current climate.

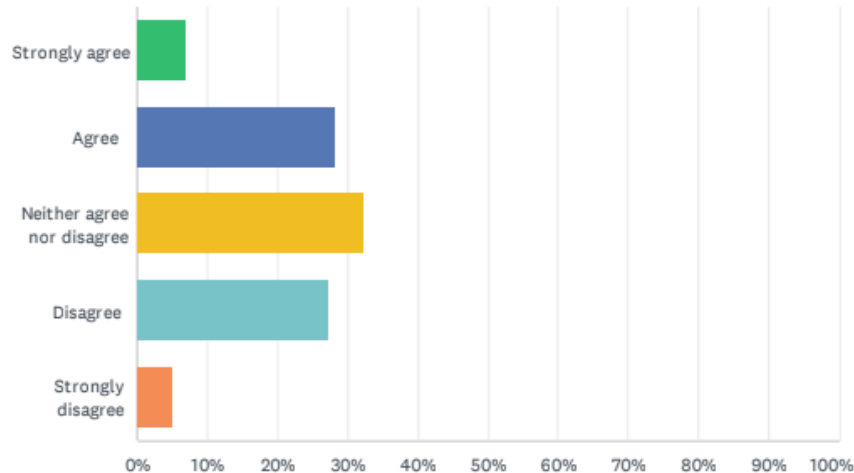
School Libraries: All but one who provided comments noted they now carry stress, worry, fear, and anxiety, or feel sadness about their work. This includes feeling “under a microscope,” regularly second-guessing collection decisions, losing autonomy because of administrative decisions, feeling scared because of being visible as an LGBTQ+ person, hesitating to tell people what their job is, and that they are considering leaving the profession. One commenter noted that while they love their job, it is now “the most controversial role in the building.”

Special Libraries: No comments.

Uncategorized Library: No comment.

Question 10: The current political climate affects my ability to do my job.

Answered: 274 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Strongly agree	6.93%	19
Agree	28.10%	77
Neither agree nor disagree	32.48%	89
Disagree	27.37%	75
Strongly disagree	5.11%	14
TOTAL		274

Data takeaway:

The percentage of school library respondents who strongly agree or agree is 52.3%, which is more than 17% higher than the total for these two responses for the survey as a whole (35.03%).

Comments Summary

Academic Libraries: Some of those who shared comments noted that funding has been politicized, leading to staffing losses, and that the environment of anti-intellectualism has had an impact on their ability to do their work. One noted funding cuts have impacted the ability to engage in professional development. Another noted that vendors are proactively censoring because of what has been happening in other states.

Public Libraries: Several of those who commented noted feeling burnout, less joy and pride in their work, or the difficulty of “stomaching” the comments of some patrons. Several noted they

are second-guessing their collection decisions or being more conservative in what they choose for displays. One noted how much time they are spending on dealing with challenges, which is taking away from other meaningful work they could be doing. One commented that it is becoming more and more difficult to be a politically neutral public servant, and feeling ostracized in the library community when they speak out against changing dimensions of the profession that they see as politically motivated, and/or left-leaning activism. Another noted they make an effort to find books that reflect conservative viewpoints but aren't hateful. Several expressed that feeling their library is valued in /by their communities has shielded them from impact so far. One feels they are doing a better job because they are so focused and motivated by what is happening.

School Libraries: The comments that were shared almost universally discussed either feeling stress and anxiety or second-guessing selection decisions. One said they are self-censoring out of fear, not purchasing things they would have in the past. One person changed jobs because the political climate hampered their ability to do their old job. Another noted how much time is now spent handling concerns and challenges, another noted that dealing with all the challenges is "mentally exhausting."

Special Libraries: No comments.

Uncategorized Library: No comment.

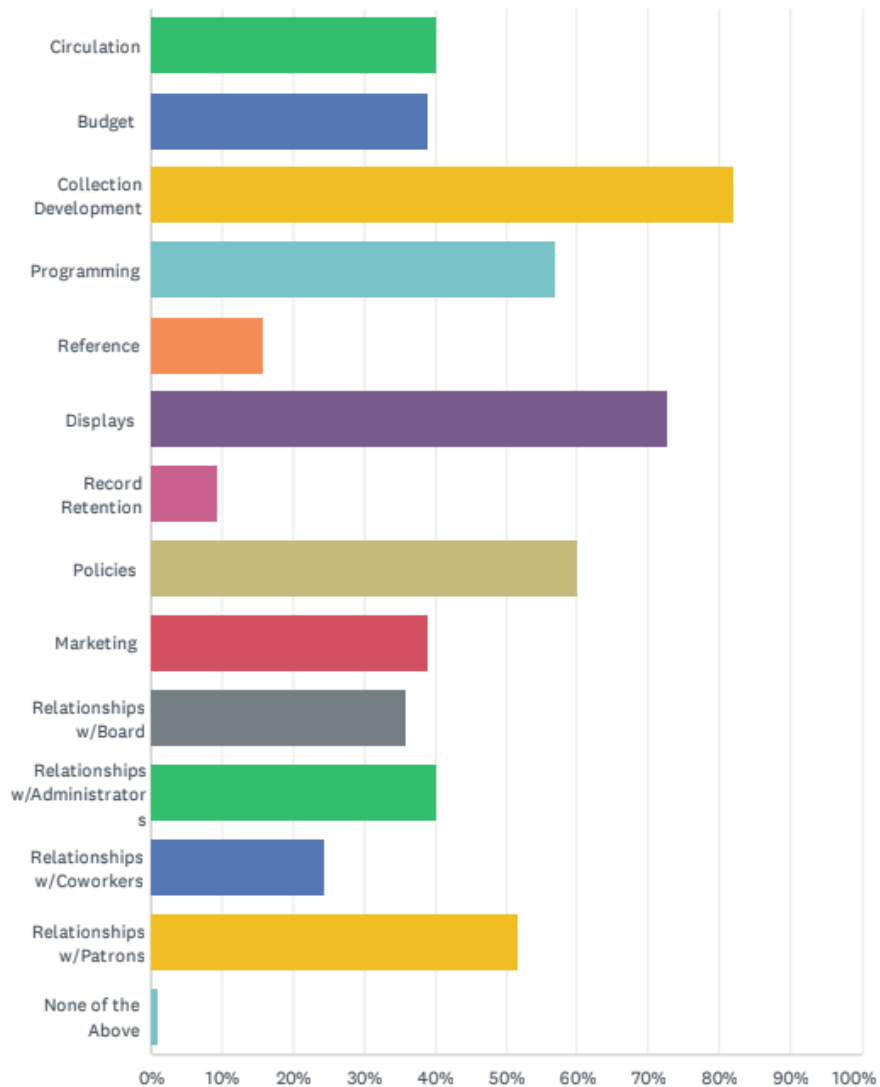
AREAS OF IMPACT

Question 11: Libraries were asked to share where they are seeing impact from the current challenges to intellectual freedom in general. Response selections included: circulation, budget, collection development, programming, reference, displays, record retention, policies, marketing, relationships with board, administrators, coworkers, or patrons.

All responses:

Q11 Please check the areas where you see/feel those impacts:

Answered: 95 Skipped: 179



Data Takeaway:

Librarians report seeing the impact of intellectual freedom concerns and support across several work areas. Not surprisingly, collection development (82%), displays of materials (77%), policies (60%), and programming (57%) received the greatest number of responses. In terms of how intellectual freedom concepts and conversations impact their work relationships, only a quarter of respondents reported an impact on relationships with their coworkers, with an increasing reported impact on relationships with administrators (40%), with their boards (36%), and with patrons (52%).

Comment Summary

Academic Libraries: Not surprisingly academic libraries are not experiencing many firsthand implications of patron-initiated challenges. However, one response notes the impact of the greater political conversation on the news cycle, influencing state legislators.

Public Libraries: One respondent shared a noted improvement in the relationships between administration, board, and staff as they work together to preserve intellectual freedom. It was also noted that this work has a drain on staff time and capacity.

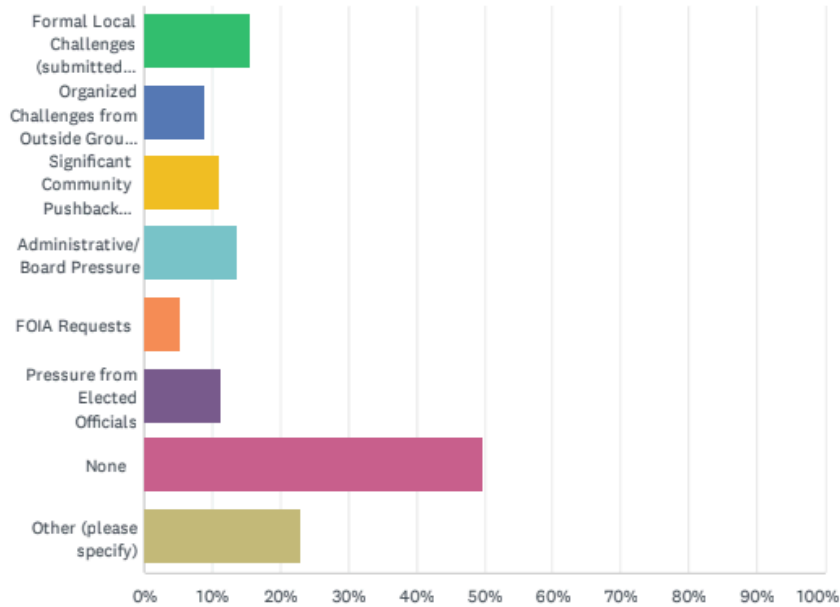
School Libraries: Several K12 librarians commented that the relationship with parents and families is an area of greatest concern for them.

INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM SITUATIONS

Question 12: Describe the types of situations your library has encountered this year

All responses:

Answered: 264 Skipped: 10



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Formal Local Challenges (submitted formal requests)	15.53%	41
Organized Challenges from Outside Groups or Individuals	8.71%	23
Significant Community Pushback (Social Media Attacks, Public Comment, Calls, etc.)	10.98%	29
Administrative/Board Pressure	13.64%	36
FOIA Requests	5.30%	14
Pressure from Elected Officials	11.36%	30
None	49.62%	131
Other (please specify)	23.11%	61
Total Respondents: 264		

Data Takeaway:

It is worth noting that almost half of the respondents did not experience a formal challenge or any significant concerns expressed by their local community about materials held in their library. Those facing more formal intellectual freedom-related inquiries experienced this through Freedom of Information Requests (FOIA) (5%), some expression of significant community pushback (11%), or through a formally submitted local challenge (16%). Several comments indicate that regardless of the number of formal challenges, libraries are aware of concerns

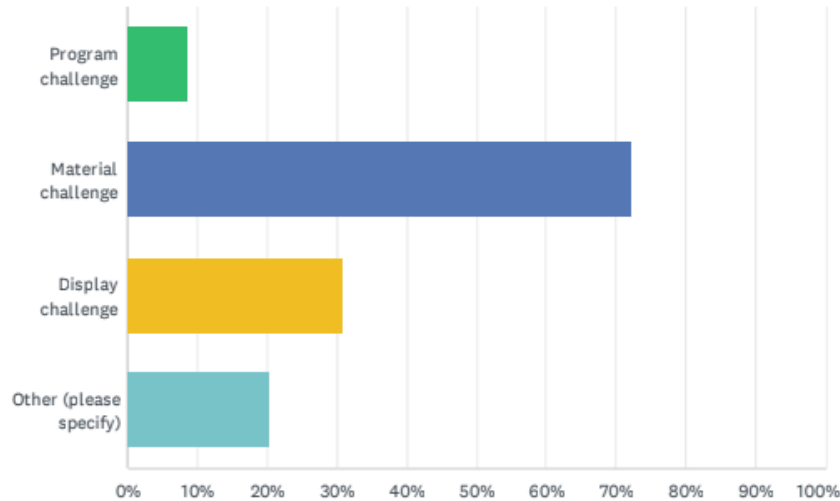
about materials within their communities. Many are hearing from patrons directly with questions or complaints about the selection and placement of materials, often regarding displays or materials related to LGBTQ topics. Several respondents noted social media chatter or other community comments during public meetings. Other respondents reported missing, moved, or intentionally damaged display materials on LGBTQ or other contested topics. Several comments indicated some level of job insecurity related to book challenges, including threats to cancel school library events such as Battle of the Books or book fairs

INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM CHALLENGES

Question 14: My library has experienced the following challenge/s this year (check all that apply)

All responses:

Answered: 94 Skipped: 180



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Program challenge	8.51% 8
Material challenge	72.34% 68
Display challenge	30.85% 29
Other (please specify)	20.21% 19
Total Respondents: 94	

Data Takeaway: Of the 274 survey participants, 94 responded to having at least one kind of intellectual freedom challenge in 2024 (approximately 34% of participants). Of those who reported experiencing a challenge, materials challenges were by far the most common (72%), with display challenges coming in at 31%, Other at 20%, and program challenges at 9%.

Comment Summary

Academic Libraries: While there were no official challenges to materials or programs, staff noted that they made decisions not to offer programs based on concerns of what the public may think. Other staff raised concerns about maintaining neutrality.

Public Libraries: Many staff noted public pushback and informal challenges around Pride month displays in June.

School Libraries: Many staff noted informal challenges, social media attacks, and vocal groups at board meetings. Staff had individuals come to schools with lists of books to see if libraries had any items on the shelves. Staff also experienced harassment from community members in the form repeatedly demanding to go through libraries and classroom libraries and excessive emailing. Staff were also warned by administration to censor choices for library if they would be in danger of losing their job.

Special Libraries: No comment

RESOURCES UTILIZED

Question 17: What made your library prepared? What resources did you utilize for help and support?

Resources Utilized:

- Contacted ALA for guidance
- Support from other libraries and colleagues
- Met with leadership to come up with solutions
- Clear policies and procedures
- WLA Intellectual Freedom Toolkit
- Trustee Week Training
- Articles in professional literature
- Webinars
- CCBC
- WEMTA
- DPI
- Municipal attorneys
- PLA/WLA conference sessions
- Robust training for staff on how to handle complaints and on policy/procedure

Question 18: What could have helped your library be more prepared?

- Strong social media strategy
- Prepared statements for staff/media
- Revise/strengthen policies
- System-wide initiatives and support for intellectual freedom
- Trainings on local challenges vs. outside coordinated challenges
- Communication with other schools/libraries
- De-escalation training

Would you like to add a comment to share with fellow library staff anonymously? (A selection below):

Challenges to intellectual freedom are difficult, high-stress experiences designed to grind you and your organization down into dust. It sounds trite to say "remember to take care of yourself," but the truth is, you have to do what's best for your mental health. Whether that means a bubble bath, therapy, or looking for a new job, you have to protect yourself if you're going to protect others. It is never, ever shameful to make hard choices related to your career and well-being. It is VITAL. You are in this fight because you believe in it; you can continue to fight it no matter where you are or what you are doing. Fight as hard as you can, but don't destroy yourself in the process. We need you.

If you are feeling the stress, please take time to take care of yourself. Reach out to your professional organizations or WI DPI. They are in your corner and will support you in every way they possibly can. Remember to take care of "YOU!"

The CCBC is ready to help you!

Keep up the good fight! Representation matters. Coming from a queer person (who found the right books as a teen) you never know what it will mean to a kid or teen to find themselves in a book. It helps to make you feel less alone.

Continue to be there for the totality of your community and trust that they will be there for you as well. Empathy is the path forward.

Parents are not the enemy and people who are concerned about children's safety are not the enemy. We may feel attacked when our collections are challenged, but nothing is gained from an us vs them mentality, especially when it comes to our own communities. I hope we can approach these circumstances with an open and listening attitude and come to an understanding if not an agreement with people who think differently than us.

Keep up the great work everyone! We are needed at this critical point in history!

I'm encouraged by the spirit and dedication of amazing library colleagues in dealing with these issues, sometimes on a daily basis. Wisconsin librarians are the best!