

Martin Garnar and Dustin Fife

# Fear and Politics

Today's Climate in Academic Libraries

**A**cademic Library Workers in Conversation is a *C&RL News* series focused on elevating the everyday conversations of library professionals. The wisdom of the water-cooler has long been heralded, but this series hopes to go further by minimizing barriers to traditional publishing with an accessible format. Each of the topics in the series were proposed by the authors and they were given space to explore. This conversation is about the current political climate for academic libraries and how library workers can support each other.—*Dustin Fife, series editor*

**Dustin Fife:** Martin, the world is moving fast. Laws and policies are being manipulated at breakneck speed and education is being flooded with a reassertion of a status quo that many of us believe is harmful and counter to our institutional missions and personal values. While I know legal exposure is a literal and existential threat to many organizations, I am also seeing a troubling trend across higher education toward proactive compliance before courts have completed reviews.

At the same time, I know there are no easy answers as the threat of legal challenges can come from inside or outside our communities, from federal and state actors, or special interest groups. I have already been part of discussions in a library consortium where it was decided to end a proposed initiative proactively, institutions began changing how awards and scholarships are allocated even before the recent “Dear Colleague” letter on February 14, 2025.<sup>1</sup> Our national organizations are changing the descriptions of some of their programs, and I, as an incredibly privileged person at a private organization in a fairly liberal state, have felt levels of personal concern and instability that I have never experienced before. And while I know these are not new problems in our society, they do feel particularly palpable at this moment in time.

All that to ask, now what, Martin? What role should libraries play within their communities as hostility toward higher education grows? How are we going to maintain our individual North Stars?

**Martin Garnar:** So many questions, Dustin! Let’s cut down on the overwhelm factor and try to answer one at a time. Before I start on that, I want to reflect on your status quo comment. For me, what’s been really disorienting have been the attacks on things that I would have categorized as the status quo, such as orderly (if not welcome) changes in policy when a new administration takes power or the assumption that our country wouldn’t be openly

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threatening the sovereignty of our closest allies. As of this writing, it's still too soon to tell what will actually happen as a result of all these initiatives, but it's still hard to believe that we're living in a time when there's actual proposed legislation<sup>1</sup> to buy "or otherwise acquire" Greenland and rename it Red, White, and Blueland.

Of the questions you posed, the one I want to answer first is how we're going to maintain our individual North Stars, and I'm going to interpret "individual" to mean both my personal values as well as my individual library's values. If we don't center our values in our work, then I think we're much more prone to make decisions out of fear or expediency. I'm reinforcing my personal values by making sure I'm staying connected to like-minded people and talking about how to support our shared values in these trying times. I've been doing that through formal means like facilitating the ALA Intellectual Freedom Round Table's IFRT Reads program and getting more involved in my faith community, and I've been doing that through informal means like more regular check-ins with friends and family to process the latest news.

As for my library's values, I'm really glad that we invested the time in drafting our values statement a few years ago using an inclusive process. We use them to engage with job applicants and see what resonates with them, and it's been heartening to hear them talk about why the values are an important factor in why they want to work at our library. We've also developed a values framework that we use when drafting policies or creating new committees to help us think about how those mechanisms of our daily work should be supporting our values. The most recent set of documents that went through that process were collection development and reconsideration of library materials policies. Drafting the former was a good exercise in reminding us what's important to communicate about equity of access and diverse collections, while drafting the latter was filling a policy gap. I know that many academic libraries don't have a reconsideration policy because most challenges are directed at public and school libraries, but given the times we're living in, I think it's essential that EVERY library has good policies for dealing with challenges.

Dustin, what are you doing to keep your compass pointed at the North Star?

**Dustin:** Thank you for easing my overwhelm, Martin. Just one question at a time. I can do that.

I love your approach to focusing on and reinforcing your personal and organizational values. Strong policy and values can help mitigate fear and should replace expediency whenever possible. And, as the Berenstain Bears taught me as a child, "it's never too late to correct a mistake."<sup>3</sup> By that I mean, it's never too late to fill a policy gap. Building policies on shared values is essential to progress. I am an educator though, so I do hope to change hearts and minds, but the good thing about policy work is that you can take steps to make your libraries more supportive while you wait. Policy is key to lasting transformational change. When policies are done well they do not constrain; they inform, empower, and protect. I believe this is an important moment to look inward and align policies so that team members have the support that they deserve. Good policy also benefits all community members by making services more legible.

Not to belabor my love of policy, but this work is something that we have a lot of influence over as library teams. Yes, there are federal, state, and even institutional policies that we do not control. However, there is so much that we do control that affects our environments and the experiences of library users and workers on a daily basis. If you want to make the

library more accessible to all, it is a good time to dive deeply into the spirit and law of the Americans with Disabilities Act. If you want to build a supportive and inclusive team, it is essential to look at hiring and retention programs. There is a reason that higher education is being challenged through aggressive policy change. It works. It is also a tool at our disposal though, and libraries should use it.

I also love your approach to fortifying yourself with personal connections. How do we fortify our colleagues beyond policies?

**Martin:** That's a great question. Though I'm mindful that it's neither good nor healthy to promote a workplace as a family, as that can improperly blur the lines between work and personal lives, I do care about my colleagues, especially when there's horrible stuff happening in the world. I think one of the most important things that leaders can do is to talk about what's on their mind and create the space for others to chime in so they know they're not alone. I send a daily email to my staff (a story for another time) and use that venue to mention news items or other events that might impact us.

For example, when that "Dear Colleague" letter on DEI initiatives came out over a weekend, I talked about it in my Monday email and noted that our college's Office for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion was holding a previously scheduled public session that afternoon to talk about how they are approaching their work in this climate. I saw six of my library colleagues in the audience, and while I don't know if it was my announcement that put the event on their radar, at minimum I made it clear that they could use work time to attend. On other occasions, when I've mentioned something that's on my mind, I've had staff contact me to share their thoughts on the topic or to simply thank me for naming some of the challenges we're all facing. I try to make it clear that I often don't have the answers for what to do, but by making the space to talk about what's happening, our collective minds can usually come up with possible ways to respond.

We are also fortunate to have a Center for Restorative Practices at the college that, among other services, offers something called Circle Keepers training to give participants the skills to facilitate discussions about tough topics. One of the library's Circle Keepers offered a session for library staff in January for anyone who wanted to check in about how they were feeling in the current political moment. About a quarter of the team attended, and while I won't get into specifics of what was shared (part of the ground rules for participating), I will note that one of the themes was concern from and for our trans colleagues. Afterward, participants noted that it was important to have a place to talk about their fears and be reminded of the resources available to them as well as to affirm that their colleagues are there for them.

On a purely biological level, I always have snacks in my office and make a point of bringing in donuts from the local shop on a regular basis. Sometimes the folks who stop by just grab something and say thanks, but others take the opportunity to stay and chat about what's on their mind. When that happens, it's a chance for me to reinforce the fact that I care about them both as colleagues and as people, and whether I'm offering solutions or just commiserating, I hope my staff are getting the message that I'm here for them.

Dustin, what other obstacles do you see coming?

**Dustin:** First, I think you hit something there that is so important. There need to be dedicated spaces to integrate how the current environment impacts us professionally. We need honest conversation. We need to continue to name things. Of particular importance to libraries, beyond wellness for all library workers, will be censorship. I do think that we

will see some textbook censorship that will NEED to be challenged in courts, but we will see much more self-censorship and “chilling.” We have talked about these topics for generations, but even now I see how I have chosen to use words in this article that are different from what I would have used previously. That is a real outcome. There will be widespread self-censorship. We also should recognize that some have always had to use these practices to be safe in higher education. We need to “name it to tame it,” as my therapist, and many others I am sure, love to say. Make space for people and do not dismiss concerns. But do not assume the agreement of everyone on our campuses either. No, we do not need to move all communications to in-person interactions, try to completely stay off the radar, or treat our colleagues with suspicion but we should not assume we are all on the same page. Talk more, not less in these complicated times.

Martin, any final thoughts before we go?

**Martin:** Dustin, as always, I appreciate you as a thought partner. The last thing I want to say is that we have to resist the urge to proactively comply out of fear. I’m lucky to be at a college where we are standing firm on our values, as we already believe everything we’re doing is in compliance with federal and state law. Until there’s a legal reason to change our practices, we’re going to stay the course. In terms of the library, that means we’re still going to purchase the resources our community needs. We’re still going to celebrate the diversity of the people who use our library in our programming and displays. We’re still going to post and share our values on our public website so that everyone knows what kind of library we aspire to be. I know that many of our colleagues are in very different situations and don’t have the privileges we do to be able to resist, so some folks are going to have to make hard choices.

What’s your final word on this, Dustin?

**Dustin:** I know we are privileged to address this topic and discuss possible responses from “safe,” private institutions. However, I also know these strategies can be useful most places because we all have operational values. Libraries have values that change lives, and we should be working toward progress, not perfection. So, I will leave us with what the sticker that sits on my computer as I write says, “onward ever, backwards never!” ✍

## Notes

1. US Department of Education, “U.S. Department of Education Directs Schools to End Racial Preferences,” press release, February 15, 2025, <https://www.ed.gov/about/news/press-release/us-department-of-education-directs-schools-end-racial-preferences>.

2. E. L. Carter, H.R. 1161 - Red, White, and BlueLand Act of 2025, introduced February 10, 2025, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/house-bill/1161/text>.

3. S. Berenstain and J. Berenstain, *The Berenstain Bears and the Trouble at School* (Random House Books for Young Readers, 1987).