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Reading Between the Lines

Celebrating Banned Books Week Through the Lens of the Information Literacy Framework

Book challenges, attempts to restrict or remove reading materials from libraries and schools due to content objections, pose a significant threat to intellectual freedom. By targeting works that offer diverse viewpoints, these efforts limit access to ideas that foster critical thinking, empathy, and cultural understanding. When successful, such challenges can result in the banning of books, silencing voices and stories that deserve to be heard, and effectively curtailing the right to read and explore different viewpoints. The ACRL Information Literacy Framework places intellectual freedom at the heart of academic librarianship, echoing ALA's firm stance against censorship. By embracing this framework, academic libraries are called to create spaces where students can freely explore a wide range of ideas, perspectives, and sources—without barriers to access or inquiry.

Held each fall, Banned Books Week (BBW) reinforces this mission with its central message: the freedom to read, a cornerstone of a healthy democracy and an informed citizenship. BBW highlights the importance of intellectual freedom and the need to protect readers' rights and access to information, drawing attention to the ongoing need to protect the rights of readers and the integrity of our educational and cultural institutions.

Background

In response to a surge of book challenges within libraries, schools, and bookstores, BBW was launched in 1982 to highlight the importance of the freedom to read. The *Island Trees School District v. Pico* (1982) Supreme Court case, which ruled that school officials can't ban books in libraries simply because of their content, was definitely a catalyst.¹ What began as a joint initiative between the American Booksellers Association and ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF), spearheaded by Judith F. Krug and the Freedom to Read Foundation, has grown into a national movement supported by a coalition of organizations. Throughout American history, and in many parts of the world, the battle over book censorship has remained a recurring issue. Whether driven by political, religious, or social agendas, these efforts challenge the core democratic principle that individuals have the right to access information and form their own opinions. As such, defending the right to read is not just about protecting books; it's about safeguarding the freedom of thought itself.

In the past couple of years, however, communities across the country have witnessed an unprecedented surge in the number of book challenges. The alarming rate is obvious from

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the ALA's recent data. In 2024, OIF tracked 821 attempts to censor library materials and services, including 2,452 unique titles. In 2023, OIF documented 4,240 unique book titles targeted for censorship as well as 1,247 demands to censor library books, materials, and resources. The number of titles targeted for censorship surged 65% this year, reaching the highest levels ever documented by OIF in more than 20 years of tracking.² Public libraries witnessed a 92% increase, and school libraries had an 11% increase in challenges over the previous year. Titles representing the voices and lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC individuals make up 47% of those targeted in censorship attempts.³ The director of OIF, Deborah Caldwell-Stone, noted, "This is a dangerous time for readers and the public servants who provide access to reading materials. Readers, particularly students, are losing access to critical information, and librarians and teachers are under attack for doing their jobs."⁴

BBW Events and the Framework

At Salisbury University (SU) Libraries, information literacy, guided by the Framework, is central to library instruction. Librarians teach through various modalities and styles, applying the Framework not only in the classroom but also in outreach and broader educational initiatives.

BBW activities at SU offered meaningful opportunities for both active participants and casual attendees to engage with key elements of the Framework, specifically the frames Information Has Value and Scholarship as Conversation as well as Searching as an Exploration and Authority is Constructed and Contextual. While SU Libraries have celebrated BBW in various ways over the years, this article focuses on the major events from the past few years while aligning them with the above-mentioned frames.

The Information Has Value frame emphasizes that information is not just a neutral entity; it has value in various forms, including its economic, social, and intellectual impacts. This understanding is vital for navigating the complex landscape of information production, distribution, and access.⁵

As per ALA, "Intellectual freedom is a core value of the library profession, and a basic right in our democratic society. A publicly supported library provides free, equitable, and confidential access to information for all people of its community."⁶ It is a fundamental principle of libraries and is crucial for fostering critical thinking, open inquiry, and diverse perspectives. Censorship, on the other hand, is the suppression of information or ideas. It can take various forms: from challenging materials and/or outright banning of materials to subtle forms of control over what information is shared or how it is presented. Understanding that information has value is essential for recognizing the crucial importance of intellectual freedom and the harm caused by censorship. When individuals and communities have free access to diverse information, they can make informed decisions, engage in critical thinking, and participate in a more democratic society. Censorship restricts this access, undermining the value of information and limiting intellectual freedom.

The Scholarship as Conversation frame refers to the idea that communities of scholars, researchers, or professionals engage in sustained discourse with new insights and discoveries occurring over time because of varied perspectives and interpretations.⁷ Experts understand that a given issue may be characterized by several competing perspectives as part of an ongoing

conversation in which information creators and users come together and negotiate meaning. An SU BBW panel discussion around censorship and intellectual freedom encouraged the audience's critical thinking and to instinctually question the veracity of challenges. The panelists upheld that the regular attacks on books and library workers having to defend their reasoning for the collections are at risk of being "normalized." This sentiment is expanded in one of the panelists' articles, where the author states, "Library advocates should not engage in this kind of direct dialogue over threatened texts but should shut down this kind of rhetoric at every turn. These things are not up for debate."⁸

The above-mentioned frames were evident during the SU BBW events over the past three years. Students understood that book bans were not new; however, the meteoric rise of the book challenges, post-pandemic, seems deliberate and targeted. According to Kelly Jensen, "While there are some 'classic' books being banned, the vast majority of books targeted since 2021 have been by or about people of color and queer people. This is deliberate—removing the books is about erasing those identities, stories, voices, and experiences."⁹ It was both encouraging and inspiring to observe the high school and college students articulate their perspectives with conviction and well-supported arguments. The discussions illuminated a crucial point: if a book's credibility hinges on its creator's expertise and context, then censorship inherently compromises what is deemed authoritative. This directly connects to the Authority is Constructed and Contextual frame.

Each year, the Banned Books Week Coalition announces a theme. Based on the 2022 theme, "Books Unite Us. Censorship Divides Us," the Maryland Library Association (MLA) Intellectual Freedom Panel (IFP) and SU Libraries started planning early and applied for the Freedom to Read Foundation's Judith F. Krug Memorial Fund grant. Somewhat disappointed but undaunted when denied the grant, they decided to move forward with programming, deeming that the escalating challenges were too critical and important to ignore.

Consequently, collaborating with the Wicomico Public Library (WPL) and the Eastern Shore Regional Libraries, the hybrid event was to be held at the Dr. Ernie Bond Curriculum Resource Center (CRC), an SU Libraries branch. WPL organized a BBW Poster Contest for middle and high school students. A book display of the top 10 most challenged books of the previous year was provided. The author/illustrator, mother/son duo, Carole and Jeffery Boston Weatherford, were invited to provide the keynote address, based on Weatherford's prolific career, whose authored works have often been the target of challenges or removals. The panelists, composed of the MLA IFP Chair as the moderator, an SU psychology professor, the WPL Executive Director, and a Baltimore County Public Library Collection Development Manager, as well as Carole Boston Weatherford, presented an insightful and lively discussion on the topic.¹⁰ Energized and inspired by the success of this event, it was decided to expand the event for the following year.

In 2023, the SU Libraries, again in collaboration with WPL, held a week-long BBW event, "Let Freedom Read," which included book displays in the main library, the Guerrieri Academic Commons (GAC), and the CRC. The GAC highlighted the top censored books and other challenged books, arranging them by reason for censure: violence, race/racial stereotypes, anti-police/anti-American, sexually explicit, offensive language, and LGBTQ+. The CRC held a series of displays, a month-long exhibit of the top 10 censored books,¹¹ a white board survey asking students to write their responses to "What's Your Favorite Banned Book?," and a poster board display of community school-age students' artwork resulting

from a WPL organized multimedia art contest for local middle and high school students based on “The importance of the freedom to read theme.”¹²

SU Libraries offered several BBW activities: a “Shredded Books Game,” which was a student competition to guess book titles from photocopies of challenged books that had been cut up; a Pop-In Film Fest; a day of films based on banned books, showing in the GAC; and two social media engagements, the first being a Student and Staff Reflection, where participants were asked to reflect on the year’s theme then share their thoughts on a favorite banned or challenged book they had read (participants could win swag and a Kindle), and the second being a Civic Engagement Campaign, where statistics and information about local book challenges was shared throughout the week.

At the end of the week, Kelly Jensen of Book Riot delivered the keynote at the culminating hybrid event on the theme “Banned Books Week, Let Freedom Read.” This year, the panelists included the WPL director, an SU education professor, a Towson University librarian, a published scholar on the topic, the CEO of the Southern Maryland Regional Library Association, and a Wicomico County ELA teacher. Beginning with the question “Why now?,” the diverse panel progressed to an inspirational discussion that offered hope and excitement for the future. Topics ranged from different kinds of libraries supporting each other to the necessity of speaking to legislators to bring awareness. The discussion was enhanced by the active participation of students from a local high school.¹³

The above activities were designed to encourage participants to seek out and read challenged books, inspiring a personal commitment to resisting censorship. They underscored the importance of intellectual freedom and how censorship limits access to diverse perspectives—ultimately impacting our ability to explore information strategically. This aligns closely with the Searching as Strategic Exploration frame, which emphasizes the value of open, informed inquiry.

In 2024, SU Libraries took a supporting role while the WPL took the lead by hosting events in downtown Salisbury, Maryland. Based on the BBW theme for that year, “Freed Between the Lines,” the events included “The Disappearing Bookshelf: Why You Should Write Kidlit in an Era of Book Challenges”¹⁴; “Write Your Truth,” a creative writing workshop to learn to write your truth, presented by Howard County Maryland Poet Laureate Truth Thomas¹⁵; and “Read Your Truth,” an opportunity for community members to be Freed Between the Lines by reading passages of their work or an excerpt from a favorite book.¹⁶ Although the events hosted at the public library did not consciously adhere to the Framework, they still aligned with several frames, as libraries are crucial civic institutions serving as a community nexus for information access, lifelong learning, and civic engagement.

Conclusion

It is critical that book challenge discussions be kept alive throughout the year and not be confined to just one week. As such, the 2024 Maryland Library Association and Delaware Library Association joint annual conference included a re-created presentation of “Banned Books Week: Why Now?” and additional dedicated programs that addressed intellectual freedom issues in academic libraries and beyond, such as an interactive poster, “Unveiling the Pages: Navigating Book Challenges and Censorship in Maryland and Beyond.”¹⁷ At SU, a new interdisciplinary First Year Seminar course titled “Chapters &

Challenges: Banned Books & Social Issues” was designed by Education and Social Work professors to provide students with a deep dive into the issues.

While BBW, held annually in late September or early October, serves as a critical reminder of the threats to intellectual freedom, it is important to understand that the commitment to resisting censorship must extend beyond a single week. A good starting point is to explore the ALA’s regularly updated lists of challenged and banned books, including the recently released Top 10 Most Challenged Books of 2024.¹⁸ These resources highlight the ongoing efforts needed to protect the First Amendment right to read and access diverse perspectives. Embracing information literacy, through the frames of Information Has Value and Scholarship as Conversation, equips students and the public to think critically about what they read, share, and defend. In addition to the ALA OIF, organizations like PEN America¹⁹ and Book Riot offer practical tools and actions to help individuals and communities plan meaningful BBW events and push back against censorship all year long.²⁰ ❧

Notes

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