

## INTELLECTUAL FREEDOM IN ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

by Charlene C. Cain

The experience of censorship by academic libraries is different from that of public and school libraries, in that academic librarians are protected not only by the intellectual freedom principles of the American Library Association but also by the standards for academic freedom adopted by groups such as the American Association of University Professors.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, threats to confidentiality in college libraries have been just as ominous.

A prime example of this history is when the FBI's Library Awareness Program (LAP) tried to enlist librarians to check the library records of people under investigation, claiming that they were not investigating controversial authors, but only the people who wanted to read them.<sup>2</sup> The librarians were also asked to track photocopying and computer database usage.<sup>3</sup> The FBI told the National Commission on Library and Information Science that the Soviets considered librarians to be excellent spy material partially because librarians could deposit disinformation in their libraries.<sup>4</sup>

Although there is no evidence that librarians ever were recruited as spies, the possibility does give us pause. Do our personal political beliefs affect our ability to do our jobs? Do we view library materials through the lenses of feminism, political correctness, or our personal political or religious beliefs? It is our job to facilitate the comparison of ideas by our selection of library materials—but we accomplish that only if the selection is diverse. If a librarian excludes an entire category of books or buys only one viewpoint, then that librarian is guilty of censorship. However, if the librarian makes her best effort to add to the collection the best titles in a category, the process is that of selection.<sup>5</sup> There is a fine line between the two—one that is drawn by the motive and professionalism of the librarian. When the process is truly one of selection rather than censorship, that is when the librarian has raised his work to its highest level. This kind of attention to detail takes time, patience, a far-reaching expertise regarding the publishing industry, and some knowledge of the scholarship in given subject areas. The necessity of a dispassionate approach to selection in academic libraries is confirmed in a statement on intellectual freedom principles espoused by the Association of College and Research Libraries.<sup>6</sup> However, changing economic times has demanded that some faculties participate to a much greater extent in the selection process, and the competitiveness between academic departments for library resources can threaten the time-honored comprehensive approach to decision-making in the selection process.<sup>7</sup>

Our manner of applying intellectual freedom principles affects the everyday way we transact business. It has been said that challenges to intellectual freedom in academic libraries are more likely to be internal than external.<sup>8</sup> A lack of scrupulousness in regard to the confidentiality of interlibrary loan requests, online surveys, and routing slips can result in a loss of privacy for our patrons and therefore violate their intellectual freedom. There is a need for discretion in the notes we write to each other regarding the research needs of our patrons, to say nothing of the inviolability of circulation records.

Do all of our academic libraries incorporate the Library Bill of Rights into their collection maintenance policies and mission statements? Do our computer use policies, and the practices

that go with them, square with our ethical imperative to fight censorship? Computer use policies, also known as acceptable use policies, are aimed at making the computer user responsible for the material he or she accesses. These policies are one way for universities to guard against overloading computer networks while still maintaining services related to their educational missions. Academic librarians are understandably nervous about student use of copyrighted material on their personal websites, as well as the possibility that harassing email can be sent from public access terminals in the library.<sup>9</sup> Such policies are often written not by librarians but by computer center personnel, which means that non-librarians are in control of the selection process for a library resource. These policies are, however, preferable to the use of filtering software, which tends to disallow access to sites that have not been reviewed by the software company. The ACRL policy on intellectual freedom principles for academic libraries includes the firm statement on filtering:

Open and unfiltered access to the Internet should be conveniently available to the academic community in a college or university library. Content filtering devices and content-based restrictions are a contradiction of the academic library mission to further research and learning through exposure to the broadest possible range of ideas and information. Such restrictions are a fundamental violation of intellectual freedom in academic libraries.<sup>0</sup>

Finally, it cannot be stressed enough that academic librarians need to stand with our colleagues from all types of libraries when censorship issues are discussed. Our positions on these issues are far less likely to threaten our jobs than similar stands by public or school librarians, and it is incumbent upon us be aware of current threats to intellectual freedom in our communities. Academic librarians responsible for library instruction courses can also serve this cause by incorporating an explanation of the Library Bill of Rights into their lectures. This alone can have a long term effect, for what we say to our students—who may well become the public library trustees and school board members of the future—can have an impact on how a legal authority handles censorship cases in the future..

<sup>1</sup>. Gemma DeVinney, "Academic Librarians and Academic Freedom in the United States," *Libri* 36 (Mar. 1986): 32.

<sup>2</sup>. Natalie Robins, *Alien Ink: The FBI's War on Freedom of Expression* (New York: William Morrow and Co., Inc.), 376.

<sup>3</sup>. *Ibid.*, 378.

<sup>4</sup>. *Ibid.*, 393.

<sup>5</sup>. Lester Asheim, "Not Censorship But Selection," *Wilson Library Bulletin* 28 (September 1953): 66.

<sup>6</sup>. ACRL Intellectual Freedom Committee, "Intellectual Freedom Principles for Academic Libraries: Third Draft," *C&RL News* 60 (June 1999): 470.

<sup>7</sup>. Barbara Jones, "The Academic Aspects of Intellectual Freedom," *American Libraries* 30 (June/July 1999): 80.

<sup>8</sup>. American Library Association, *Intellectual Freedom Manual*, 5th ed. (Chicago: American Library Association, 1996), 283.

<sup>9</sup>. Jones, 80.

<sup>0</sup>. Web version of ACRL's Intellectual Freedom Principles for Academic Libraries an Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights is located at <http://www.ala.org/acrl/principles.html>, last visited September 1, 2000.