Divisive Politics and Threats to Academic Libraries

Working Paper for Comment
EveryLibrary Institute NFP
March 5, 2024

NB: The EveryLibrary Institute is seeking feedback on both the content and structure of this Working Draft, as well as any points that may require clarification, expansion, or revision. The paper is currently in draft stage, and your critical appraisal would be extremely valuable in strengthening the arguments, ensuring clarity, and identifying any areas that may need additional work. Please see the end matter for details.

Academic librarianship has long been concerned with core topics like open access, digital preservation, and copyright. While these remain critical issues for our profession, it's also important for library leaders to address the politicization of thought that is impacting the larger scholarly community. As information professionals, we are uniquely positioned to leverage our expertise to help solve the problems being encountered on campus. By understanding the pain points currently at play in higher education and by doubling down on the power of information, technology, and collaboration, academic librarians can set a path for their institutions rather than being reactive to social and political turbulence.

Libraries of all types are under threat, and academic institutions are no exception. Issues like censorship, anti-access, and discrimination are making headlines in school, public, and academic libraries, as well as their professional organizations and content and technology providers. State legislation that impacts print books has been proposed and passed, but it also affects collection development, library programming, funding, the accreditation process, professional certifications, contract language, and affirmative defense protections for library professionals.

Academic librarians are experiencing an increasingly complex and evolving set of threats to our profession. The politicization of educational content, coupled with movements that seek to undermine Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) principles and the teaching of Gender Studies, has created a need for a robust response from the academic library community. These challenges are not merely external pressures but reflect deeper societal divisions that penetrate the core of academic inquiry and freedom. We find ourselves at a juncture where our response will be vital to the future of academic inquiry and scholarship.

Anti-library groups and their campaigns targeting public libraries and schools have created a climate of professional self-censorship, online and in-person attacks on teachers and librarians, and the vilification of the profession’s accrediting association. Academic librarians must be
proactive in addressing these issues and standing up for the values of intellectual freedom, access to information, and the importance of libraries in society. This puts the preservation of intellectual freedom and the commitment to providing access to a diverse range of perspectives and information under scrutiny.

**Threats to DEI are Core Threats to Academic Libraries**

The divisive lexicon of American politics in 2024 includes attacks on academic institutions, faculty, university leadership, and endowments. For academic librarians, emerging and reactivated threats include mandated shifts from the social sciences and the humanities to STEM at state-funded universities, the introduction of outcomes-based curriculum, the elimination of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and other programs or courses of study, and the elimination of tenure and the freedom of thought it protects. State funding for higher education is being leveraged to alter programs, staffing, and even institutional directions. Research itself is being politicized.

Campus speech, academic freedoms, and student protests have been brought into a larger anti-elite, anti-DEI campaign, which pushes an oft-repeated narrative that conservative thought is being suppressed in academia. In a January 13, 2024 Op-ed in The Hill, entitled Higher education needs to reform itself. It also needs to defend itself, PEN America Freedom to Learn Program Director Jeremy C. Young wrote about bills that have passed in multiple states that he called “higher education gag orders,” amounting to “government censorship,” and an expanding effort to “undermine the university governance structures that protect academic freedom.” The common element in many of these efforts is the people advancing an anti-academic agenda. “While there are very real problems on college campuses...bad-faith actors are using this as a pretext to promote a longstanding and largely unrelated political agenda that is hostile to higher education as a whole,” which Young called a “coordinated attack.”

This pressure on the academy is not only at the local and state level. The current Republican Speaker of the House, Rep. Mike Johnson, has blamed “the academy” for the Republican Party losing “more highly educated voters.” He said universities “are run by liberals almost entirely and sometimes by radical liberals,” and claimed, “students are being indoctrinated rather than educated.” The conservative Claremont Institute report, How Texas A&M Went Woke, endeavors to break down the university’s transformation into what the author Scott Yenor calls “a typical, leftist American university.”

A New York Times investigation, ‘American Under Attack’ Inside the Anti-D.E.I. Crusade scrutinized the anti-DEI efforts of Yenor and others that have led to anti-DEI laws around the country that have scaled back or eliminated DEI on college campuses. The story showcased discussions including Yenor determining that, “Terms like ‘diversity’...need to be saddled with more negative connotations,” While also writing, “We should use the term that is most likely to stigmatize the movement...While nobody wanted to seem in favor of discrimination,’ he argued,
‘social justice’ could be ‘stigmatized so that when people hear it they can act on their suspicions.’

These attacks on DEI programs on campus are not rhetorical. Beginning in January 2024, a law that dismantles DEI programs on state college campuses has gone into effect in Texas. According to the Dallas Morning News, the sponsor of the legislation has been reaching out to campus administrators to remind them of the consequences of failing to comply or to “subvert the provisions of the bill.” According to the article, there is an undercover effort in the state to expose programs that continue DEI initiatives under another name. In Oklahoma, an executive order closed all DEI offices on state-funded colleges and universities. In Florida, the University of Florida has closed its Office of the Chief Diversity Officer, eliminated DEI positions and faculty appointments, and halted DEI-focused contracts with outside vendors. The University of Florida, the flagship university of the state system, fired all DEI staff on March 1, 2024, including the Office of the Chief Diversity Officer.

The politicization of educational content, coupled with movements that seek to undermine Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) principles, has created a need for a robust response from the academic library community. These challenges are not merely external pressures but reflect deeper societal divisions that penetrate the core of scholarly inquiry and freedom. This puts the preservation of intellectual freedom and the commitment to providing access to a diverse range of perspectives and information under scrutiny. We find ourselves at a moment where our response will be vital to the future of academic inquiry and scholarship.

A “Critanic Panic” on Campus

Anti-DEI campaigns are closely intertwined with efforts to vilify the term Critical Race Theory (CRT), underpinning a broader social engineering agenda that attempts to manipulate public discourse. In March 2021, Christopher Rufo's tweet about freezing the brand of “critical race theory” signaled an intentional strategy to sow discord and reshape societal perceptions. Rufo’s assertion that this would turn the term toxic by lumping various "cultural insanities" under the CRT brand reveals an attempt to trigger what could be called a Critanic Panic. Much like its precursor the Satanic Panic of the 1980s and 90s, we use the term Critanic Panic to describe an artificially inflated manufactured moral panic that is leveraged by certain political factions to rally a base, instigate division, and undermine educational efforts that aim to address and redress historical and contemporary injustices. These false panics about CRT are meant to galvanize opposition against what is, in essence, a complex legal framework pertaining to American law and structural racism, falsely associating it with a profound and negative impact on K-12 education and curriculum, an impact it does not inherently possess.

The hijacking of terms and subsequent public perception is not a novel tactic; it has long been recognized as a fundamental instrument for reality manipulation. Philip K. Dick, a noted science fiction writer, once remarked, “The basic tool for the manipulation of reality is the manipulation of
words. If you can control the meaning of words, you can control the people who must use the words.” The Critanic Panic around CRT exemplifies this manipulation, as it leverages linguistic control to influence and often mislead public opinion, steering the discourse away from factual understandings of CRT and DEI.

Academic Librarians must be acutely aware of such linguistic manipulations. We are not merely keepers of information but also stewards of knowledge who facilitate the critical examination of ideas and promote informed dialogue. The creation of a Critanic Panic poses a direct challenge to this mission, as it seeks to discredit the very foundations upon which we build our collections and services — the diverse and equitable representation of voices and experiences.

The librarian’s role in advancing intellectual freedom becomes even more crucial in an era where terms like CRT and DEI are weaponized to stifle academic inquiry. Academic librarians must engage in and promote critical literacy. It is our role to help our patrons recognize the distinction between disinformation campaigns and scholarly debate. By curating collections that reflect a multiplicity of perspectives, hosting forums for discussion, and providing access to resources that delve into the rich and complex history of race and law, we actively counteract the effects of Critanic Panic. We must also educate our users about the strategic use of rhetoric and framing in public discourse, equipping them with the tools to discern and analyze the intentions behind the information they consume.

Information and Disinformation

Political efforts to spread misinformation and disinformation about the integrity of federal elections became more intense on campuses following the 2020 presidential election cycle. This movement to discredit research by sociologists, political scientists, and other researchers could have a chilling effect on research into disinformation efforts and threats to election integrity during the 2024 election cycle. Nationally, politically motivated efforts are underway to chill research on disinformation and election interference. Academic researchers studying disinformation and election integrity have been subpoenaed by the House Select Subcommittee on the Weaponization of the Federal Government.

Members of the select House investigative subcommittee of the Judiciary claim researchers, government agencies, and technology companies are part of a “Censorship Industrial Complex” to “silence conservative voices.” State-funded institutions have received Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests for their research data and communications. Researchers and institutions are being sued or FOIA-ed by conservative organizations. Technology companies are suing researchers related to big data collection. Government employees are being told not to report disinformation to tech companies and universities.

The issues of disinformation extend beyond academia. Tech companies have scaled back their election integrity teams, changed ownership, or changed their approaches to political content since 2020. These same companies are also grappling with artificial intelligence adoption,
leaving their disinformation efforts opaque. Disinformation researchers are currently determining whether to scale back their plans to cover these topics during the 2024 election cycle while also creating legal defense funds to protect themselves from these subpoenas and lawsuits.

While self-censorship is a reality that library professionals and their colleagues will need to address, academic censorship may be something they are likely to face or can prevent. In February 2024, a college professor in Florida tweeted that her institution had rejected her request to buy banned books for adult students taking part in her “privately funded Endowed Chair project on... 'Banned Books & First Amendment Rights.'” School Library Journal reports that 35 percent of school librarians in a September 2022 survey self-censor often or always. However, less than half had experienced a formal book challenge meaning that self-censorship is both preemptory and reactive. This pressure in K-12 has only grown since the survey and is moving into higher ed.

**Bellwether State Laws and Policies**

Academic publishers of books, journals, and textbooks in the Humanities and Social Sciences are under threat in any of the more than 25 states that have passed or prioritized anti-library, anti-access legislation. The 2024 legislative cycle, taking place ahead of the next Presidential election cycle, will keep these bills prioritized. Existing laws, even those being litigated, will impact anyone doing business with state consortia, buying groups, university systems, and state institutions.

Florida made drastic adjustments in history instruction, including the content of AP African American History course, following a public row between the Governor and the College Board. While these efforts are taking place in a K-12 institutional context, academic institutions will inevitably be impacted. In Florida, there will likely be a cohort of student applicants and newly enrolled students who are not academically prepared for college, not because they need remedial assistance but because they lack the collective knowledge base of the average college freshmen. While these examples showcase the challenges colleges and universities will face finding applicants capable of the rigors of college, Florida is not alone.

Oklahoma made headlines when State Superintendent Ryan Walters announced his support for a PragerU curriculum to replace existing state standards. In a September 2023 press release, Superintendent Walters said that “PragerU Kids provides educational, entertaining, pro-American kids content,” which he referred to as “high quality materials rich in American history and values.” Thus far, school districts throughout the state have declined to add PragerU content into their curriculums. The same State Superintendent recently added a controversial social media influencer, who is not a library professional or an Oklahoma resident, to a state library advisory committee.
In Missouri, the language of a rule change proposed by the Secretary of State in 2023, would have required each of the approximately 900,000 K-12 students in the state to have an individual database account to access state library databases. This proposal lacked a plan for where and how the personal identifying information (PII) of these students would be collected, retained, and stored. As Secretary Ashcroft runs for nomination as the Republican candidate for Governor, he has doubled his efforts to codify the 2023 rule change into state statutes.

Dual Enrollment as the Achilles Heel of Intellectual Freedom on Campus

Passed and proposed state legislation impacting academic institutions have increased. Issues that had only previously impacted only K-12 or public libraries have started to surface in Higher Ed. One under-appreciated leading-edge issue is that of dual-enrolled students. When laws about censorship, access, and privacy are written without the guidance of library professionals who understand the ramifications of proposed changes, dual enrollment students create tremendous challenges for academic libraries and their parent institutions. Anecdotal reports from the 2023 North Carolina Library Association conference indicated that parents’ rights issues may be extending into colleges and universities. Academic librarians in attendance reported that parents of dual-enrolled students had visited their libraries asking about their collections.

Dual enrollment programs allow high school students, often under age 18, to enroll in college courses for credit before graduating high school. Students can start their college education early rather than waiting until they are in college to start earning credits. Dual enrollment programs are seen as a way to broaden high school students' educational opportunities and provide financial benefits by reducing the time and cost of completing a college degree. Unlike other accelerated learning options, such as Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB), dual enrollment programs offer college-level courses rather than courses that might lead to college credit based on exam performance.

Dual enrollment has emerged as a crucial pathway for high school students to gain access to higher education. It is also a soft target for advocates of censorship and anti-access to find a new way into college and university campuses. These accelerated programs are designed to challenge students academically, expose them to higher education culture, and save both time and money on college education. However, integrating minors into the college environment calls for careful consideration of campus policies, particularly those concerning access, privacy, and safeguarding academic inquiry and free expression.

In 2022, the Oklahoma legislature passed a bill that impacted dual enrolled students, high school students taking college courses. The bill forced academic institutions to go back to their content providers to update contract language and to determine whether the providers could comply with provisions requiring content curation designed for K-12 schools to be imposed on
academic institutions with students under 17 years of age. These restrictions impacted all students, faculty, and researchers until the institutions could create separate pathways to e-resources for students under age 18. The vagueness of the language left it unclear whether the law impacted all academic institutions or only state institutions and the cost of creating a separate pathway meant some institutions had to leave the K-12 curation controls in place. The law was so problematic that a 2023 bill had to be passed to rework the provisions, prevent K-12 curation controls from being forced on the entire institution, and clarify whether the law included private institutions.

To continue to serve dual-enrolled students who are under 18, colleges and universities must ensure that their policies strike a delicate balance. While they must ensure that minors' rights and protections are in place, they must also avoid imposing overly restrictive or censorious measures on the broader college community. Therefore, these policies should be tailored to protect minors while still upholding higher education principles, such as the unencumbered pursuit of knowledge and the robust exchange of ideas.

Academic Libraries support dual enrollment programs by providing access to resources and services that help high school students succeed in college-level courses. However, since dual enrollment students are typically younger than traditional college students, libraries must consider several factors when developing policies and services for this demographic. Institutions may need to develop dual enrollment-specific guidelines that address the unique needs of these students without compromising the academic freedom vital to a university's mission.

Like all departments on campus, academic libraries must comply with privacy laws, such as FERPA when storing and sharing student data. To cater to students under 18, academic libraries may need to adjust their access and circulation policies and, when necessary, consider the use of parental consent forms. All policies must comply with legal standards and ethical considerations for serving this demographic.

Information literacy instruction is crucial for dual enrollment students to succeed in college courses. Academic libraries could offer tailored information literacy programs for these students to develop research skills essential for success in college courses. Library administration should work closely with high schools to understand the specific needs of dual enrollment students. Library policies should address the physical safety of minors in the library, and staff should be trained to understand the unique needs of dual enrollment students. Academic Libraries can create specific programs or outreach efforts aimed at dual enrollment students to better integrate them into the campus community and library culture.
STEM, Humanities, and Academic Libraries

A resurgent tide of anti-intellectualism in the United States poses a significant threat to higher education institutions’ traditional roles and values. Critics of academia often dismiss the social sciences and humanities, claiming that they lack practicality compared to the hard sciences, which are seen as more directly linked to technological and economic progress. This perspective not only undermines the comprehensive nature of higher education but also threatens to diminish the essential skills and values that these disciplines foster, including critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and social awareness.

An anti-humanities stance is particularly evident in ongoing debates over educational policy and resource allocation. Several states are actively aiming to reshape academic curricula to better serve economic interests, often at the expense of the liberal arts and other disciplines that promote creativity and a deep understanding of complex social issues. Florida has removed Principles of Sociology from the core courses that make up the general education requirements at state colleges and universities. In December 2023, the Florida Commissioner of Education, Manny Diaz, Jr., tweeted that “sociology has been hijacked by left-wing activists and no longer serves its intended purpose as a general knowledge course for students.” He added that under the Governor, “Florida’s higher education system will focus on preparing students for high-demand, high-wage jobs, not woke ideology.”

North Carolina legislators passed a FY2024 budget bill that ended funding for any new distinguished professorships, scholars, or fellows at public universities unless they were in STEM subject areas. The funding restrictions impact new roles, while existing endowment funds will allow for current non-STEM professorships to continue.

The Oklahoma Education Superintendent has called for state colleges and universities to eliminate gender studies. In December 2023 he proposed new guidelines for libraries calling the American Library Association guidelines on information literacy “woke” in an interview with KOCO. The new guidelines for Oklahoma are “entirely skill-based and grade-based” according to KOCO. In the interview he made claims that pornographic material is in grade schools along with “the belief that white people are racist.” A Nebraska bill being reconsidered in 2024 targets database companies specifically with claims about pornographic content. The claims appear to be based more on conspiracy theories and a misunderstanding about what research databases are and how they work than facts but, if passed, any college or university accessing resources through the state could be impacted.

In Mississippi, the State Auditor reviewed all courses being taught at state-funded institutions in 2023 and recommended the elimination of funding for Anthropology, African American Studies, and Women and Gender Studies while calling for an outcomes-based model as a way to counter the brain drain in the state and encourage graduates to remain in Mississippi. The Governor of Mississippi passed a law impacting libraries and content providers by regulating digital and online resources in K-12 and public schools while specifically not including academic institutions.
or impacting dual-enrolled students. The law sets out terms for withholding payment from vendors for noncompliance, and while language was added to allow for curing, the bill itself shows a fundamental misunderstanding of the size and scale of statewide contracts.

This trend goes beyond a mere shift in educational policies. It reflects a broader cultural question about the value of knowledge and the purpose of education. The diminishing role of social sciences and humanities in academic curricula undermines the role of education in fostering a democratic society ready to tackle diverse ideas and challenges. As educational institutions grapple with these pressures, they must advocate for a balanced education that recognizes the intrinsic value of all disciplines. It is essential to defend the liberal arts as they play a vital role in developing informed citizens capable of contributing to a diverse and pluralistic society. They must also resist the reduction of libraries to mere technical workshops and assert the importance of literature, history, and the arts in nurturing the intellectual and cultural growth of young minds.

Lessons for Higher Ed from No Child Left Behind

In the United States, the Higher Education Act (HEA) plays a crucial role in maintaining the quality and performance of educational institutions. One of the ways it does this is by addressing institutional accreditation, which ensures that institutions meet specific standards of quality. During reauthorization processes, Congress can make amendments and adjustments to the provisions related to accreditation.

The U.S. Department of Education recognizes various accrediting agencies, including regional and national accreditors. Regional accreditors focus on non-profit institutions with an academic focus, while national accreditors review vocational or technical programs, including for-profit institutions. Accreditation is important because it impacts an institution's eligibility for federal funding and student financial aid. The HEA sets standards that accrediting agencies must meet to be recognized as reliable authorities on institutional quality.

The accreditation standards for higher education institutions have evolved to include a significant emphasis on academic libraries within their accreditation rubrics. Libraries play a pivotal role in student learning and success and are central to the educational mission of institutions. The Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) has developed a set of Standards for Libraries in Higher Education that provides a framework for libraries to demonstrate their alignment with the educational objectives of their institutions and support accreditation processes.

The ACRL's standards emphasize outcomes that contribute to institutional effectiveness, continuous improvement based on assessment results, and a focus on student success outcomes. The standards are adaptable to each institution and library's specific context, ensuring that they can respond effectively to the unique needs of their user population. They are
structured around principles such as institutional effectiveness, professional values, educational role, discovery, collections, space, management, personnel, and external relations, with specific performance indicators for each principle.

Different accrediting bodies may have varying expectations and mentions of libraries in their standards. For instance, the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) and the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC) both address libraries in their standards. WASC incorporates libraries as part of their core campus functions, while the ACCJC has a dedicated standard for Library and Learning Support Services. The conversation about the importance of libraries and librarians in accreditation standards has been ongoing, reflecting a wider dialogue about the evolving role of libraries in higher education.

Academic libraries must be engaged with the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act to ensure that our contributions to educational quality are communicated and recognized within these frameworks. The Act is more than ten years overdue for reauthorization. Planning should be ongoing to avoid the pitfalls that befell school librarians when the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), introduced in 1965, was replaced with No Child Left Behind in 2001. No Child Left Behind ignored countless studies demonstrating the impact school librarians had on test scores and literacy, collection development quality and its support for the curriculum, and the quality of the technology libraries introduced to students and the schools themselves in the days before the proliferation of education technology.

No Child Left Behind decimated the school librarian profession by altering program certification and education requirements as well as accreditations, and even the adjustments in the 2015 reauthorization called the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) have not been able to resurrect the profession. In 2000, before No Child Left Behind went into effect, 86 percent of schools had librarians representing a growth from 40 percent in 1963 the year before the passage of the ESEA, according to the National Center for Education Statistics’ report, America’s Public School Libraries: 1953-2000. A 2019 American Library Association report indicated that only 61 percent of the schools with libraries employed full-time library professionals. The report was cited in “The Essential Leadership of School Librarians,” a brief published by the International Literacy Association in 2022.

A 2018 School Library Journal article, School Librarian Where Art Thou?, cited the National Center for Education Standards which showed that “more than 10,000 full-time school librarian positions” were lost in the United States representing, at worst, 19 percent of the profession while changing job titles, including teacher librarian, and a lack of standardization around support staff reporting makes the numbers harder to quantify. An “Education Week Research Center analysis of federal data” (Common Core Data) verifies the nearly 20 percent loss between 2000 and 2015 (from 54,000 public school librarians in 2000 to 44,000 in 2015) while also highlighting the reductions impacted minority districts “the 20 districts that have lost the most librarians had on average 78 percent minority student populations.” As of May 2022, the
Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates there are nearly 49,500 elementary and secondary librarians employed in the United States.

Serving the Institution Benefits the Library

Library professionals have long been technology first adopters. They demand new technology from their content and technology providers, and when they don’t get what they need, they are not shy about creating it themselves. Whether creating technology for their own use, making it open source to share with others, or partnering with businesses to create new services (as the original Kuali Ole libraries did when they partnered with libraries and service providers to build the FOLIO library services platform in 2019), library professionals are rarely late to the new technology party. These same professionals understand the need for and value of policies, and by bringing their expertise to policy making, strategy sessions, and future planning, library professionals can flex their dexterity and raise the profile of the library and the profession.

To library professionals, data analytics is nothing new. Library leaders and professionals from e-resource librarians to collection development experts have been collecting, leveraging, and clamoring for more analytics for the better part of a decade. The debate is whether they are presenting the right facts to the right stakeholders to safeguard or increase their materials budget and staffing numbers and secure the library’s place on campus. If libraries have the data and can indicate the ways in which they are influencing research and science, then budgets should reflect that influence.

If library leaders have not been able to make the connection or broaden the discussion to demonstrate the impact they can have on campus-wide priorities, new narratives must be sought, new scenarios created. Library professionals need to leverage the data analytics built into their library resources, created in-house, or crafted by peers to demonstrate value and scale up their offering and their collections. Practical demonstrations of the impact of library services on core issues including student success and retention, based on data from library resources or learning management systems (LMS) are just the start.

In February 2024, Bar Veinstein, vice president of academic and government at Clarivate, was interviewed by a Charleston Conference Director Heather Staines, herself a long time first adopter, as part of the Charleston Leadership Interviews podcast. Veinstein spoke to the same point — libraries as tech adopters. He mentioned that in 2012, when Boston College implemented Ex Libris’ Alma, a next-generation ILS, Veinstein understood it to be the first cloud services adoption on the college’s campus. In the interview, he said, “Libraries have managed to change and show they can change and show that they can realize value and adapt better than any organization on campus.” Staines reinforced this idea, calling librarians “the keepers of technology on campus.” A large academic technology and content provider is asking, “How can we help the library to actually engage and interact with other stakeholders on campus.” His company is even creating resources to do so.
Academic librarians have to take advantage of the opportunity to leverage their technical acumen. Instead of talking about getting a seat at the table, they need to pull up a chair, bring their analytics and know-how to that table, and start to contribute. Library professionals, who are well-versed in privacy and data protection, and fought for anonymization of user data, can confront the rapid rise in on-campus technology from the LMS to swipe cards and call for digital stewardship policies about the use of location and login information. There is an oft-repeated business trope, “you can’t manage what you can’t measure.” What’s repeated less often is another trope, “not everything that can be measured matters and not everything that matters can be measured.” Library professionals seem well-positioned to help administrators understand the difference.

In addition to parleying their knowledge of analytics, library professionals need to ask themselves what they know about the larger issues impacting business and technology, research, and higher education. Academic libraries need to develop and leverage ways to share the latest news and competitive intelligence with administrators, department heads, faculty, and researchers. Being cognizant of institution-specific concerns — state bills, laws, or regulations — or curriculum changes being driven by new technology would allow library leaders to create opportunities. Are librarians using library-only language when describing services — “full-text,” “serials,” “discovery services” — or are they letting decision makers know they can provide stakeholders with the latest articles from top journals, delivering competitive intelligence customized to each stakeholder’s needs, right to their phones, emails, or online?

By identifying which departments dominate budgets, benchmarking, and administrative priorities, understanding which services or policies drive decision making, or identifying new and emerging areas of study, library professionals can begin to use the power of information to influence decision making and aid decision makers. By understanding the priorities, concerns, and pain points of institutional stakeholders, library professionals can use library services to set up alerts and even send out newsletters based on institutional or departmental imperatives. Not only are these newsletters a reminder of the resources available to stakeholders, but they are also a reminder that library professionals are problem solvers and providers of valuable resources.

Artificial intelligence is already revolutionizing society. Most of the current discussion at the institutional level revolves around cheating concerns, the impact on research, and how to adjust teaching to address student access to ChatGPT and other AI resources. AI ultimately will impact the way institutions prepare students for their future careers. Given the pace of technological change, demonstrated by the rapid adoption and displacement caused by AI, it seems prescient to consider how STEM- and non-STEM-educated job seekers will fare. Opinions vary widely as to which jobs will be affected by artificial intelligence. A 2023 IBM Institute for Business Value report on AI declared that “STEM skills are plummeting in importance” to executives who were surveyed about the impact they expect from AI with STEM proficiency moving from first in a 2016 survey (of most critical workforce skills) to 12th in this most recent survey. According to the report, those same “executives are more focused on developing people skills, with time
management and prioritization, collaboration, and communications topping the list” of skills that are most important, with foreign language and proficiency in reading, writing and mathematics, and ethics and integrity ranking higher along with a “capacity for innovation and creativity.” The report also refers to a “pivot away from STEM skills” as a demonstration of “the volatility of the talent landscape.

If a university has a business or engineering school, trend analysis should spotlight citizen development, also called citizen enablement, as a way organizations can resolve the IT talent gap. This is the gap between the new technologies driving business analytics and the number of trained data analytics professionals who also possess the necessary business acumen to help those organizations take advantage of this emerging area. If retraining current staff and training new employees is a necessary part of alleviating this ongoing talent gap, then providing information that shapes the future curriculum advantages both the institution and its graduates. If businesses need something more from fully trained IT and business professionals than they are getting from existing employees, prospects, and current graduates, it will affect how colleges and universities educate those students. Liberal arts students who can take advantage of low-code, no-code solutions in the workplace will benefit. Library professionals, looking for professional respect or a way help institutional stakeholders understand the changes caused by this democratization of technology, can leverage the tools, technologies, and content designed for research to serve this larger purpose.

Preparing the Industry for Change

Librarians have a unique opportunity to leverage their technical expertise in any meaningful discussion of the future of academic libraries. Instead of simply aiming to be included in important discussions, librarians should take the lead in bringing their analytics and know-how to the table and start making influential contributions. Library professionals are well-versed in privacy and data protection and can use their expertise to confront the rapid rise in on-campus technology. For instance, they can call for data stewardship policies that govern the use of location and login information. Library professionals are also well-positioned to help administrators understand the difference between what can be measured and what matters.

Library schools need to offer management training and ongoing professional development in leadership and management. Library leaders can either hold themselves apart from the institution or reinforce their role in the curriculum and as technology providers. Library schools should train future librarians to be more aware of the business of libraries, budgeting, advocacy, career paths, and the challenges facing the profession.

The industry must start discussing the more prominent issues threatening libraries, library professionals, and library businesses. For instance, state universities and libraries located in "Red States” will be affected by any legislation that impacts academic funding, tenure, DEI programs or related majors and courses, as well as by AI, threats to research freedoms, and
laws affecting K-12 curriculum. Library professionals must respond by identifying allies and building coalitions and alliances that can educate legislators, counter detractors, and speak up for the profession.

Library administration can reach out to their former students, alumni, and local businesses surrounding the institution as potential supporters. A larger coalition can be built among union members on campus, faculty, and their larger associations. Publishers and content and technology providers are also facing legislation and threats to their business, and they need alliances. We need to discuss legislation with our vendors and find common ground.

Library professionals must act if access to information is at risk and information itself is being vilified. Library leaders should take action if research is in danger of being politicized or censored and if self-censorship or book bans start to impact scholarship. So often library leaders lament not having a seat at the table at their institution, suppose publishers, library content and technology providers are singled out, and library contracts or budgets are threatened. In that case, library professionals need to pull up a chair and bang on that table.

Recommendations Section

As the academic librarianship sector approaches a critical turning point, it is essential for library professionals to not only react to changes but also anticipate and shape them. We are interested in urging librarians to proactively redefine their roles, engage deeply in policy advocacy, and equip themselves with the advanced training necessary to lead in an environment fraught with legislative and ideological challenges. Three key recommendations have emerged from analysis: It is time to rejuvenate our educational roles to mobilize campus allies; it is necessary to assertively participate in policy debates concerning the Higher Education Act; and, it is vitally important for more academic librarians to pursue comprehensive policy training to navigate the intricacies of education policy at the campus, state, and federal levels. These recommendations are intended to help academic librarians lead with forethought and confidence, ensuring that academic libraries remain institutions focused on knowledge, academic freedom, and innovation amidst systemic and ideological shifts.

Recommendation #1 - Reenergize Our Roles on Campus to Activate Allies

Librarians play a crucial role in shaping the future of library services and information management. To remain relevant to our colleagues and administration, academic libraries should continue to embrace emerging technologies. Technologies like artificial intelligence, machine learning, and blockchain could be integral to the future of library services. Academic librarians should continue to champion open access initiatives to democratize access to information, support institutional repositories, and open educational resources.
As misinformation and disinformation become more prevalent, librarians can lead the development of robust information literacy programs that equip students with the skills to critically evaluate information sources, an essential component of academic success and informed citizenship. Librarians with data science and analytics expertise can manage large data sets and assist in interpreting data for academic research and decision-making.

To prepare graduates for the dynamic challenges of leading in a library setting, library schools should consider leadership development that encompasses strategic thinking, change management, emotional intelligence, and management training. Encouraging interdisciplinary collaboration allows librarians to work closely with academic departments, information technology, student services, and other areas to create a cohesive educational experience for students. Academic librarians should be trained to have a global perspective on information services, including knowledge of international copyright laws, global information policy, and cultural competency skills to serve diverse populations.

Recommendation #2 - Participate in the Policy Debates about the Reauthorization of the Higher Education Act

As the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act approaches, academic librarians must engage in substantive policy advocacy. The HEA has a significant impact on higher education funding and embodies the legislative framework that impacts critical library operations, such as access to resources, privacy regulations, and educational standards. As the guardians of information access and intellectual freedom, academic librarians must monitor these developments and proactively participate in shaping them.

Librarians must extend their responsibility beyond library walls and actively build coalitions with a broader ecosystem of higher education stakeholders. Academic librarians must articulate the value of libraries in fostering an educated and informed society and the essential role they play in research, learning, and the preservation of knowledge. The reauthorization of the HEA should be an opportunity to redefine and reassert the role of libraries in higher education. Librarians must be actively involved in policy discussions across higher ed, not just in libraries. We need to caucus about our perspective, work with allies, and ensure our voices are heard in the shaping of a policy that will dictate our future work and impact.

As policy proposals emerge, librarians should contribute their expertise to discussions about data stewardship, privacy, and integrating emerging technologies. Their involvement in these dialogues is critical to ensuring that the reauthorized HEA reflects the evolving needs of academic libraries and the communities they serve. It is not enough to be aware; librarians must be present at the table, actively defending the tenets of open access, intellectual integrity, and academic freedom that are central to the profession.
Recommendation #3 - Produce substantial training, coaching, and technical guidance for academic library leaders about education policy issues.

Academic librarians are on the frontline of a battle for the heart of educational integrity. The higher education landscape is undergoing seismic shifts, with legislative attacks on academic freedom becoming distressingly common. We are witnessing concerted efforts to dismantle critical thinking and inquiry through anti-DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) and anti-CRT (Critical Race Theory) bills, the erosion of tenure, and the systematic deconstruction of higher education as we know it.

We must arm ourselves with knowledge and strategy in order to engage the fights at the local, state, and federal levels with equal alacrity. Academic library leaders must seek out and invest in substantial training, coaching, and technical guidance on education policy issues that are reshaping our states and institutions. We must broaden our expertise in policy advocacy, legal frameworks, and political engagement. Library leaders must look for new training beyond traditional library skills, diving deep into education policy, legislative processes, and advocacy techniques. We must emerge as not only custodians of information but also as formidable defenders of academic liberty and champions of intellectual diversity.

Librarians should be trained in crisis management and emergency response, particularly as it relates to the preservation of library collections and the provision of services during crises. Strengthening legislative advocacy programs can train librarians to effectively communicate the value of libraries to policymakers and influence legislation that affects libraries and access to information.

In order to address the current crises and anticipate emerging issues, we must forge alliances with policy experts, legal advisors, and advocacy groups who are also entrenched in defending the values of higher education. We must craft robust responses to regressive legislation and devise strategies to counter the prevailing winds of censorship and control. The erosion of academic freedom and integrity threatens the very foundation of our profession. We must speak with a clear voice and take action to defend the principles that are the bedrock of academic discourse. We must be bold and active in the face of these challenges. The future of academic integrity demands that we act now.
Conclusion and Invitation to Comment on the Working Draft

As we stand at the intersection of change, the collective action, informed strategy, and steadfast commitment of library professionals will ensure the legacy of academic libraries as enduring bastions of learning, inquiry, and intellectual freedom. This paper has presented three strategic recommendations to equip academic librarians with the necessary tools to navigate the tumultuous waters of contemporary educational policy. Academic librarians are expected to assume the roles of educational leaders, policy advocates, and strategic partners within their institutions and the wider community. By embracing these recommendations, librarians can ensure that their voices are heard and considered in the crucial conversations that shape the future of higher education.

The EveryLibrary Institute invites colleagues from across the academic library ecosystem to engage with the ideas, insights, and recommendations in this Working Draft and offer comments, feedback, and constructive criticism. We are actively seeking feedback on both the content and structure of the draft, including any points that may require clarification, expansion, or revision. The paper is currently in draft stage, and your critical appraisal would be instrumental in its development.

To make comments on “Divisive Politics and Threats to Academic Libraries”, please download a Word version of the paper at everylibraryinstitute.org/workingdraft0324 and send your comments, suggestions, or tracked changes to John Chrastka, Executive Director, EveryLibrary Institute, at john.chrastka@everylibrary.org as an attachment. Please respond by April 18, 2024. We believe that the insight of our professional colleagues and practitioners would be extremely valuable in strengthening the arguments, ensuring clarity, and identifying any areas that may need additional work.

###