Letter from the Editor

Politics, Academic Freedom, and Social Justice

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The main letter from the editors of this special issue ends with a very optimistic message about the potential "long future of social justice research...in the online pages of ISTL." However, recent events have prompted us to temper this with an open acknowledgement of the difficult political context of this research.

This special issue of Issues in Science and Technology Librarianship contains articles authored by librarians and information professionals from 12 different states, as well as Canada and the United Arab Emirates. Of those who represent academic institutions in the United States, seven states of those 12 have had bills introduced in their state legislatures in the last five years (and in some cases, signed into law), specifically targeting higher education, that: 1) prohibit diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts or practices in some way, 2) require some level of so-called "intellectual diversity" or prohibit "divisive concepts" in some way, or 3) a combination of both.

Some quick searching of the Postsecondary Legislation Database, maintained by the National Conference of State Legislatures and covering legislation introduced since 2019, reveals some concerning trends (Postsecondary Legislation Database, n.d.). Higher education-focused bills with the phrases "intellectual diversity," "divisive concepts," "critical race theory," or "social justice" have been sponsored in several states (Table 1). Some of the bills contain more than one of these phrases, and while many of them have failed before they reach the point of becoming law, the fact that there are so many proposed bills targeting individuals and institutions who are involved at some level with diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts is extremely troubling.
Table 1. Total number of bills that have been introduced between 2019 and March 2024 that concern several DEI-related phrases.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phrase Searched</th>
<th>Number of Introduced Bills</th>
<th>Number of States with Introduced Bills</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;intellectual diversity&quot;</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;divisive concepts&quot;</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;critical race theory&quot;</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;social justice&quot;</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
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Let's be clear: these phrases and concepts as described in most of these bills are nothing more than a political dog-whistle designed to intimidate and censor individuals who teach and research the different intersecting aspects of racial and social justice.

While instructional faculty are a main target of these bills, academic librarians are also vulnerable to these political pressures. A diminishing number of us are considered to have faculty status, even nominally, and an even smaller number of us have clear tenure or tenure-like job protections, including academic freedom (Walters, 2016). The introduction of these bills has led to increased fears of reprisal, including termination, for those who work within the realms of DEI.

For those who push back, there is also the possibility of threats to their health and their safety. There is no shortage of headlines about death threats for public librarians who resist book bans and censorship by anti-DEI activists (Allam, 2023; Malespina, 2023; Pendharkar, 2022; Rios, 2022; Smith, 2023; Williamson, 2024). Similarly, headlines about targeted harassment — including death threats — of higher education faculty have been on the rise (Bovy, 2023; Death Threats Are Forcing Professors off Campus, 2017; Freeman, 2020; Gluhanich, 2022; Kelley, 2019; Quinn, 2023; Tanner, 2020). If this current political climate persists, it is no stretch to assume that academic librarians who perform work around social justice issues will experience threats in the near future, if such threats have not already begun to circulate.

Politicization of our work is not new to science librarians. For years, we have had to learn how to deal with politically-motivated attacks and mis- and disinformation on a wide range of topics (e.g., climate change, vaccinations, evolution). However, the current anti-DEI climate has the potential to cause far more harm to individuals than any previous "controversial" topic. From the start of our work on this special issue, we have had at least one librarian who feared attaching their name to their manuscript proposal (they ultimately decided not to submit), and at least three of us on the special issue editorial team live in states that, within the last year, have passed or are still pressing for passage of laws that aim to suppress or prohibit entirely the work that we are doing here.

This is unacceptable. Librarians (and faculty and staff in higher education) should not have to put their jobs or their lives on the line in order to perform social justice work. Academic freedom for all who teach or research must be protected. And, ironically, the presence of such fierce resistance to social justice work emphasizes why this work is so vital.
Science and technology librarians, this letter is not for you. It is meant for your directors, your deans, your provosts, your presidents. Administrators, when the anti-DEI rhetoric inevitably turns to librarians, we need you to support us. When we teach citational justice, when we work to decolonize our catalog, when we publish or present on DEI, we need you to have our backs. In their academic freedom policies, 11 of the 15 U.S.-based academic institutions represented by authors in this special issue either reference or explicitly endorse the longstanding and seminal work, the 1940 Statement of Principles of Academic Freedom and Tenure with 1970 Interpretive Comments (American Association of University Professors, 2014). Many more institutions beyond these 15 do the same. The statement covers "teachers" very broadly, which includes librarians as well as faculty. The message is clear: our work should be protected. Even against such strong political headwinds, administrators must remain firm in their support of academic freedom and of their librarians.

References


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