

# READCON: A Curriculum for Library Readiness, Advocacy, and Community Empowerment During Challenging Conditions

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## ABSTRACT

This panel introduces the Institute of Museum and Library Services – funded [READCON](#) curriculum. READCON stands for Library **R**eadiness, **A**dvocacy, and **C**ommunity **E**mpowerment **D**uring **C**hallenging **C**onditions. The curriculum equips library workers with soft skills to develop relationships with their communities, partnering more effectively for advocacy. Library and Information Science (LIS) educators can also use this timely and relevant curriculum to enhance their own teaching, linking professional and educational practices. Building on the highly successful [Get Ready Stay Ready Community Action Toolkit](#) (GRSR), this curriculum builds foundational skills for library workers to engage in constructive dialogue on potentially divisive aspects of library programming, service, and material challenges. READCON takes Get Ready Stay Ready a step further by providing library workers with the soft skills needed to encourage community members to use the action steps included in the GRSR toolkit. Both resources are highly adaptable, multi-lingual, open-source learning tools developed by experts in academic, public, and school librarianship, education and family law, crisis communications, community advocacy and relations, and youth leadership. The READCON project will be publicly available on the internet after its public debut at the American Library Association annual conference in late June 2024.

Civic engagement is the cornerstone of democratic society. Through it, “people contribute to their communities in meaningful, productive, and sustained ways<sup>1</sup>. Historically, libraries played a key role as anchor institutions that promoted civic engagement through services, programs, and targeted communication efforts – specifically through the development and delivery of diverse library services, programming, and collections. The library’s fulfillment of its role as a facilitator and community advocate through these programs and services benefitted from the institution’s large store of public trust. In 2017, 78% of U.S. adults credited libraries with helping them “find information that is trustworthy and reliable”<sup>2</sup> with Black and

Hispanic adult respondents reporting a level of 83%<sup>3</sup>. Unfortunately, the social disruption brought on by a political landscape where misinformation is amplified through divisive rhetoric, further exacerbated by the isolation of a global pandemic and irresponsible social media infrastructure, seems to have significantly drained the U.S. public's trust. Libraries now face a growing public demand to tackle challenging or controversial issues, heal community wounds, and help their stakeholders embrace community change. Their efforts to "create an environment in which people of all ages and from all ethnic socioeconomic backgrounds feel they have a voice, a role, and a valued place in their communities"<sup>4</sup> are being met with calls for increased oversight, distrust, ignorance, defunding, and fear-driven program/material challenges.

The American Library Association's Office for Intellectual Freedom continues to track the significant increase in material/ book challenges and book ban attempts across the U.S. (167% since 2020, with 2022 exceeding 2021 records in the first 8 months)<sup>5</sup>. This trend is mirrored in increased legislative activity curtailing librarians' ability to provide resources and services and maintain diverse and inclusive collections, even making circulation of some materials a criminal offense<sup>6</sup>. Book challenges are being exacerbated by protests against library programming and events. While 2017 saw the El Paso Public Library, with funding from a Texas LSTA grant, create a pop-up civics lab, introducing civic literacy to local families by sharing bilingual materials and media in different areas of the city; January 2021 witnessed the Lafayette Parish Library Board of Control vote to reject a grant by the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities that funded books, speakers, and discussion on voting rights history<sup>7</sup>.

Despite frequent media presentations depicting a politically polarized population where half of communities supposedly are behind these challenges, recent bipartisan survey teams found large majorities in all political parties (75% of Democrats, 58% of Independents, and 70% of Republicans) oppose efforts to ban library books, services, and programming<sup>8</sup>. The same survey found wide-spread support for access to materials addressing slavery and racism (84%), police violence against Black people (68%), and LGBTQIA+ characters and stories (65%)<sup>9</sup>. This incongruence between loud, public efforts and private community thought provides library workers with an opportunity to bring people of different points of view together to have empathetic, respectful, and empowering conversations on what the library is, what it does, and how the existence of diverse and inclusive library programming, services, and collections aligns with a broad range of goals and needs shared by a library's community. To do so, library workers need culturally responsive professional soft skills.

Culturally responsive professional soft skills are communication, instructional, and inter-relational practices that "build on individual and cultural experiences and their prior knowledge...are justice-oriented and reflect[ing] the social context we're in now"<sup>10</sup>. Culturally responsive professional soft skills are not often taught in librarian preparation programs due to the high number of foundational concepts required. This is especially the case in school librarianship programs where the curriculum frequently offers little to no room for course electives. Also, librarianship is a profession still presenting as White women, where ethnic minorities make up less than 12%, and individuals with disabilities less than 4% of credentialed librarians<sup>11</sup> – despite serving a population that is increasingly multiracial and diverse (38.9% Other Races and Ethnicities<sup>12</sup>, 7.1% LGBTQIA+<sup>13</sup>, and 26% identifying as having a disability<sup>14</sup>). The READCON Curriculum centers culturally responsive professional soft skill development as the approach to (1) engage in constructive dialogue around potentially divisive aspects of library programming, service, and material challenges; (2) build trust with and between members of diverse communities (3) de-escalate confrontational situations; (4) develop consensus and

community buy-in for library advocacy needs, and (5) empower community members as active participants in local decision-making.

Ultimately, the READCON Curriculum for Library Readiness, Advocacy, and Community Empowerment During Challenging Conditions and associated Get Ready Stay Ready Community Action Toolkit will provide library workers with the confidence to push back against the small, but vocal group that is demanding a narrow and exclusive library organization funded by the whole community, but in service of a select few. It will guide library workers through this lengthy season of challenges, helping them develop the culturally responsive professional soft skills needed to build strong civic networks that bring together and empower different community constituencies, interests, and populations for proactive support of diverse library services, programming, and collections – a library for all.

## **ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS**

community engagement; curriculum; continuing education; intellectual freedom.

## **AUTHOR KEYWORDS**

school libraries; public libraries; academic libraries; social justice; censorship.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21900/j.alise.2024.1778>