



## EDITORIAL

Jessica Swaringen

Georgia Southern  
University

# Free to Read

## *Banned Books Week 2023 at Georgia Southern University*

In 2023, the student outreach team at Georgia Southern University Libraries sought to implement impactful programming in alignment with our strategic plan. Banned Books Week emerged as a relevant and timely opportunity to engage with students. Since 2020, there has been a dramatic spike in book challenges across the United States, as reported by the ALA's Office of Intellectual Freedom: 1,269 bids to censor library materials, including 2,571 unique book titles, in the year 2022 (American Library Association, n.d.). These record-shattering numbers called for a robust slate of Banned Books Week programming, so the student outreach team began planning for the occasion in early spring 2023.

“... supporters of Banned Books Week programming will cite student feedback to argue that the the initiative piques students' interest in intellectual freedom issues in a familiar and tangible way, calling them to exercise and defend their First Amendment rights.”

### Why Banned Books Week?

Banned Books Week programming has had a mixed reception over the years. Local perspectives opposed to such programming often cite Banned Books Week as a waste of time, since most of the titles highlighted are commonly taught in K–12 classrooms today (think *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *Of Mice and Men*). On the other hand, supporters of Banned Books Week programming will cite student feedback to argue that the initiative piques students' interest in intellectual freedom issues in a familiar and tangible way, calling them to exercise and defend their First Amendment rights (Griffiths 2016; Shearer 2022; Renkl 2023). In short, the goal of celebrating banned books is less about lifting bans themselves and more about encouraging dialogue on the freedom to read.

Academic Librarians feel strongly that they have a responsibility to educate their students on issues of misinformation and censorship, as evidenced in Cantwell-Jurkovic and Ball (2023). Banned Books Week provides librarians with an excellent opportunity to develop such skills in students. For example, when terms like “obscene” and “harmful to minors” are thrown around in politically charged discussions, students who are unfamiliar with the legal background of those terms may unknowingly engage in misusing them, leading to more misinformation permeating the cultural consciousness and national dialogue on censorship and book bans. In this instance, Banned Books Week programming does not only serve to promote certain items in a library collection but also serves as an opportunity to develop the information literacy skills of students.

### Programming Overview

The Banned Books Week 2023 programming at Georgia Southern University consisted of three core initiatives: an interactive display, a scavenger hunt, and an open mic night. The initiatives were marketed heavily to undergraduate students, but all patrons in the campus community were encouraged to

participate in the display and open mic night. Only the scavenger hunt was exclusive to undergraduates.

Since Georgia Southern University Libraries has a presence at both the main campus in Statesboro, GA, and the Armstrong campus in Savannah, GA, we made sure to offer a display, scavenger hunt, and open mic night on each of these campuses. The events were offered on different days of the week due to the availability of event volunteers, but the events were held generally around the same time in the evening in order to avoid events overlapping with the most popular undergraduate class times. The full schedule of events was featured on the Banned Books Week LibGuide, which has been duplicated and preserved for this article: <https://georgiasouthern.libguides.com/BannedBooksWeek2023>

## LibGuide

Prior to 2023, a LibGuide was created for Banned Books Week in 2018 and was last updated in 2020. In 2023, the outreach librarians were given editing access to the guide and were able to revise the guide to reflect the current year's ALA report and campaign. The guide's home page provides a brief explanation of the purpose and history of Banned Books Week, as well as a list of in-person programming offered at University Libraries locations.

A second page, "Censorship by the Numbers," displays infographics by the ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom (OIF). The infographics describe banned books data from 2022, as well as preliminary data from 2023. The "Censorship by the Numbers" page is meant to communicate the scope of censorship attempts to LibGuide viewers. However, the next section of the LibGuide, "Challenged Books," is meant to connect viewers to the works being targeted the most, many of which are in the GS Libraries collection. Commonly challenged titles in our electronic collections are featured on the page "In the GS Libraries," while physical copies of banned titles were included in the interactive display.

## Interactive Display

Books that have been challenged historically or recently were featured in the Interactive Display. Titles selected for the display included classics like *The Color Purple*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *Lord of the Flies*, most of which students would be familiar with as part of their high school curriculum. We also included more recent titles such as *Thirteen Reasons Why* and *The Kite Runner*. Most of the newer titles in the OIF top-thirteen list are in our collection as e-books, so those titles were included in the LibGuide, but not in the interactive display.

The display's interactive component involved a staffed table by the display, where a library employee encouraged students and faculty to contribute to the "wall of ~~shame~~ FAME" in solidarity with the freedom to read. Participants took an Instax photograph with one of the books on display (either taken "selfie-style" or by the library employee), then posted the photograph to a community collage. Some students also wrote a quote, reaction, or message about freedom to read on the collage in addition to or instead of posting a picture. By the end of the week, we had accumulated twenty-four "selfies" and twenty-five written responses on the "wall of ~~shame~~ FAME."

## Scavenger Hunt

The outreach team wanted the scavenger hunt to be a fun yet grounded opportunity for students to explore the history of book banning and book challenges in the United States. The learning objectives identified for this scavenger hunt were as follows: Students will be able to (1) recognize issues of

access or lack of access to information sources and (2) identify entities that have been responsible for banning books. At the end of the scavenger hunt, students would be asked to complete a survey providing feedback about what they learned and how we might improve the scavenger hunt in the future.

Before the scavenger hunt began, students listened to a brief introduction from a librarian about why we recognize Banned Books Week each year, as well as some definitions for clarity (e.g., what is a ban, what is a challenge, what does obscenity mean). After setting the context, the rules of the scavenger hunt were explained to students, and once everyone's questions had been answered, the students could begin hunting for clues.

The scavenger hunt directed students to work in groups to search around the library for hidden clues. Each group was tasked with using four clues to identify the title of one banned book. The clues were strategically placed in areas of interest around the library to draw students' attention to library services and collections, including our popular reading, research librarians, and mindfulness area called the "Brain Booth." Each clue provided a piece of information about a challenged book, detailing instances of the title being challenged and exploring why the challenge took place. The clue also prompted the group to explore another area of the library until four clues were secured. For each clue, the group was able to make one guess as to the title of the banned book. The winning group would be determined by a points system, where a group would earn points if they:

- Correctly identify the book title—10 points
- Complete the task in fifteen minutes—10 points
- Complete the task in twenty minutes—5 points
- Use one clue to complete the task—10 points
- Use two clues to complete the task—7 points
- Use three clues to complete the task—4 points
- Use all four clues to complete the task—2 points

At the end of the scavenger hunt, the groups were asked to share what they learned about their title with the rest of the participants. Students were also asked to reflect on their experience and what they learned via a brief survey after the scavenger hunt winners were announced. The student responses to the survey gave us a better understanding of what they learned from the scavenger hunt, and how we might improve the game in the future. Many students voiced their surprise to see certain titles included as banned books since they read these books in high school. Other students observed that, no matter one's political leanings, it's important to shed light on book bans as issues of intellectual freedom and freedom of speech.

## **Open Mic Night**

In 2023, the libraries' outreach team was seeking opportunities to collaborate with other campus departments to broaden our reach with students. We wanted to partner with departments who already engage well with their students but would also have a stake in the subject of Banned Books and censorship. The Office of Multicultural Affairs (OMA) seemed like a perfect partner in this regard—not only because OMA engages with the campus community often but because the materials most frequently challenged in the last several years have been those that feature subjects related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. OMA enthusiastically agreed to cosponsor our culminating event, open mic night, and provide beverages for attendees. They also helped us to promote the event across campus, especially to their student organizations.

At the Statesboro Campus of Georgia Southern University, the open mic night for Banned Books Week is a well-established program with a group called “Burning Swamp” coordinating and hosting poetry slams. Due to Burning Swamp’s existing reputation, fifteen students showed up to participate in the open mic night. The Armstrong Campus, however, had no such established program with the campus community. The turnout to the Armstrong Campus Open Mic Night was moderate, but it was a good opportunity to have a group discussion about censorship and the freedom to read.

The event began with an outreach librarian sharing some statistics and contextual information about Banned Books Week before opening the floor to anyone who wished to speak. A faculty member read a passage from one of her favorite challenged authors, and a student shared one of their own poems with everyone. From there, the open mic night morphed into a group discussion of challenged materials, why this happens, and our favorite challenged titles from reading in school. All participants who spoke up were given a 3D printed “trophy” to commemorate their participation in the open mic night.

### **Grant Acknowledgment**

Our Banned Books Week 2023 programming was made possible with the 2023 Banned Books Week Grant provided by the Judith F. Krug Memorial Fund. We applied for the grant in May 2023 and were notified of acceptance in June. The grant required that we consider programs, budgets, partnerships, and promotion very early in the planning process. This ended up being to our benefit; the grant enabled us to make some purchases that we can continue to use in subsequent years, and we were also able to provide refreshments for participants at our open mic night events, as well as prizes for our scavenger hunt winners.

The Grant we received funded our programming in 2023, but it is possible to do a lot of our programs without the \$1,000 grant. Most of our funds went to two cameras and film for an interactive display, which could be replicated at little to no cost to the library. We also wanted to incentivize participation in the scavenger hunt with a prize for the winning team, but there could be other ways to incentivize participation, especially by partnering with another campus department. Refreshments at our open mic night were also made possible by the grant, as well as by campus partnerships.

### **Plans for 2024**

After the success of Banned Books Week in 2023, we hope to establish Banned Books Week as a signature event the libraries will be known for at Georgia Southern University. Ample time will be dedicated to planning the events for Banned Books Week, as well as identifying new campus entities to bring in as partners. For example, the students and faculty from the Communication Art Department emerged as participants in our 2023 Open Mic Night, more so than any other academic department; perhaps in 2024, the public speaking students could be offered some kind of course credit for observing, critiquing, or even participating in the open mic night. We have also discussed hosting a panel for university faculty to discuss censorship in their fields. Banned Books Week often focuses heavily on the censorship of fiction, but censorship efforts also threaten materials for public health, sex education, and science, to name just a few fields. A panel that incorporates speakers from several disciplinary backgrounds would help to illuminate the pervasive threat posed by censorship attempts.

Pokornowski and Schonfeld (2024) interviewed library leaders from public universities from ten states, then described the perceptions and concerns of these library leaders and their employees in a research report:

Diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, programs, and units in universities are being eliminated, renamed, and/or reorganized in a number of states. Even among interviewees who suggest that the underlying services and their impacts will be unhindered, a critical issue is that many of their employees are scared, which is impacting the workplace. (2)

This fear is not unfounded, as Pokornowski and Schonfeld (2024) point out: academic librarians at public universities are often caught between the professional virtue of academic freedom and the reality of being “ beholden to state oversight” (5) and, thus, the state’s political climate. The report also describes an increase in “chilling effects,” whereby academic librarians take measures to self-censor out of fear of breaking a policy or law (Pokornowski and Schonfeld 2024). As of writing this article, the state of Georgia narrowly avoided the passage of two bills related to library services and the ALA (Nelson 2024; Sei 2024). Similar—and in some cases even more restrictive—bills have been introduced or passed in Louisiana, Virginia, and Florida (Hutchinson 2024; Povich 2023; PEN America 2023). Furthermore, the OIF has recently published its 2023 report on censorship, revealing an unprecedented number of challenges—specifically, 4,240 unique titles. (American Library Association 2024). This total number of challenged titles reflects a 65 percent increase from the same total in 2022.

It’s understandable for academic librarians to feel disturbed, insecure, and scared by these circumstances; it would be more surprising if there was no concern. But for all the efforts to restrict and to silence and to censor, librarians can make a difference and push back. As noted earlier, many librarians see it as their responsibility (Cantwell-Jurkovic and Ball 2023). Now is the time for librarians to lead campus discussions on censorship and intellectual freedom, to show students the value of diverse voices in library collections, to defend the freedom to read. Banned Books Week can serve as a most favorable moment for such opportunities in 2024.

## References

- American Library Association. 2024. “The State of America’s Libraries 2024: A Report from The American Library Association.” Accessed April 26, 2024. <https://www.ala.org/news/state-americas-libraries-report-2024>.
- American Library Association. n.d. “Top 10 Most Challenged Books Lists.” Accessed April 26, 2024. <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/top10/archive>.
- Cantwell-Jurkovic, Laureen P., and Heather F. Ball. 2023. “Truth or Consequences: Academic Instruction Librarians as Information Literacy and Critical Thinking Activists.” *Communications in Information Literacy* 17 (2): 378–406.
- Griffiths, Olivia. 2016. “Burning to Read: Letters from My Students in Support of Banned Books Week and the Freedom To Read Foundation.” *Journal of Intellectual Freedom and Privacy* 1 (2–3): 15–20. <https://doi.org/10.5860/jifp.v1i2-3.6168>.
- Hutchinson, Piper. 2024. “Ultra-Conservative Lawmakers Target Louisiana Libraries as Culture War Rages On.” *Louisiana Illuminator*, March 29, 2024. <https://lailuminator.com/2024/03/29/ultra-conservative-lawmakers-target-louisiana-libraries-with-legislation-as-culture-war-rages-on/>.
- Nelson, Craig. 2024. “With Election Season, Coastal Georgia Lawmakers Turn Attention to Libraries.” *The Current*, January 29, 2024. <https://thecurrentga>.

[org/2024/01/29/with-election-season-coastal-georgia-lawmakers-turn-attention-to-libraries/](https://www.penn.org/2024/01/29/with-election-season-coastal-georgia-lawmakers-turn-attention-to-libraries/).

- PEN America. 2023. "Florida Book Bans are No Hoax: Here are The Facts." Accessed April 26, 2024. <https://pen.org/florida-book-bans-not-a-hoax/>.
- Pokornowski, Ess, and Roger C. Schonfeld. 2024. "Censorship and Academic Freedom in the Public University Library." *Ithaka S+R*, March 28, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.320506>.
- Povich, Elaine S. 2023. "As Book Bans Gain Favor, Some Say Libraries Could Go." *Stateline*, March 31, 2023. <https://stateline.org/2023/03/31/as-book-bans-gain-favor-some-say-libraries-could-go/>.
- Renkl, Margaret. 2023. "Great Books Will Always Be Their Own Best Defense." *New York Times*, October 2, 2023. [https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/02/opinion/book-bans-education-librarians.html?ugrp=u&unlocked\\_article\\_code=1.i00.7gTT.zwHylyroALkl&smid=url-share](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/02/opinion/book-bans-education-librarians.html?ugrp=u&unlocked_article_code=1.i00.7gTT.zwHylyroALkl&smid=url-share).
- Sei, Juma. 2024. "A Number of Controversial Education Bills Fall Short on the Final Day of Georgia Legislative Session." *WABE*, March 28, 2024. <https://www.wabe.org/a-law-that-would-outlaw-the-american-library-association-from-georgia-falls-short-on-final-day-of-the-session/>.
- Shearer, Marisa. 2022. "Banning books or banning BIPOC?" *Northwestern University Law Review Online*. 117, 24–45. [https://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1323&context=nulr\\_online](https://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1323&context=nulr_online).