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SLIS Notes: What is a library in crisis?¹

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What is a library in crisis? One definition is that a crisis is an event beyond the normal situation that acts as a disruption to library operations and services and can damage the library's reputation (Pedraza, 2010). These situations draw attention, usually negative attention, and scrutiny by the library's user population, political/government entities, and even at times, the attention of the nation via outlets such as social media. Crisis management requires action in three phases—before, during, and after. The goal of crisis management is to prevent or reduce the impact of the crisis on the library. “The response by a library to a crisis is often initially defined by the amount of preparation, if any, the library is able to engage in” (Bengston, 2021, p. 5). While Bengston was speaking specifically to IT crises, the sentiment certainly applies across a variety of situations. In today's climate, it is extremely important that libraries prepare for challenge or censorship crisis. It is no longer a matter of if but when.

In Jamestown Township, Michigan, a campaign to vote down renewing library funding in response to displaying LGBTQ+ materials resulted in a budget loss of over 84% (Stein, 2022). Libraries in Lafayette, Louisiana can no longer host displays about any distinctive group—so no Black History Month, Pride Month, or even for them, French Cajun culture (Burnett, 2022). Librarians have faced personal attacks on social media, like school librarian of the year Amanda Jones (Yorio, 2022). A library in Iowa closed its doors after the majority of the staff and librarians quit over LGBTQ+ complaints (Kilander, 2022). Libraries and librarians are facing censorship issues at a higher rate than recent years. “ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom tracked 729 challenges to library, school, and university materials and services in 2021, resulting in more than 1,597 individual book challenges or removals. Most targeted books were by or about Black or

LGBTQIA+ persons” (American Library Association, 2022, para. 1).

Although coming from business or corporation perspective, Pedraza (2010) offers some preplanning strategies that libraries can incorporate for developing the library's crisis management team. First, who is going to be the library's designated spokesperson? This person needs to be higher up in the library's administrative team. They should be prepared to handle the hard questions with truth, calmness, and confidence. The spokesperson gets the information out to all the key personnel (the crisis management team), the media, and the constituents. Second, who on the crisis management team is going to disseminate the information to your library team—from pages to managers? It is important that library staff do not speak about the issue outside of the pre-determined message on any platform. In order for that to happen, someone has to share that message and has to keep them abreast of the situation. They should not be left to speculate and, as front-line workers, they deserve honesty. Third, pre-prepare a statement to build that serves as springboard so the library is ready to move with speed. Libraries no longer have days before a story breaks or days to write a response. With news channels, library customers, and the larger community using social media platforms, it is important to get an *accurate* message out quickly. Attempt to be positive and constructive. The message needs to be honest and transparent. Fourth, who is gathering the information on the crisis and keeping the crisis management team informed as a whole? By having someone designated to monitor the news and social media, it allows everyone to focus on their specific tasks. Fifth, who is reporting to the American Library Association, any parent organizations, and state library associations? This informs organizations for record keeping and reporting and alerts surrounding libraries that issues

¹ Reprinted from *Mississippi Libraries*, 85(3), 51-53.

may be on their horizon if the complaint is coming from an organized group.

In addition to having a crisis management plan in place, the library should have clear path of communication for when the censorship crisis begins. Does the staff at the circulation desk know what to do when a challenge is initiated? Does the branch manager know when to report it and to whom? Having an escalation plan will be essential for keeping administrators informed and for giving them time to activate the crisis management team. The library director and administrative team should not hear about a crisis for the first time as it is being reported on the news! If possible, test the escalation plan with different training and exercises (Pedraza, 2010). When you are crafting the statement to build upon it will be important to keep the following management principles in mind:

- “1. Understand the media interest in a crisis situation.
2. Define the problem that caused the crisis situation and determine the best strategy to follow.
3. Ensure compliance with all legal and regulatory matters.
4. Manage the flow of information.
5. Assume the situation will escalate and get worse.
6. Remember all constituencies when dealing with a crisis situation.
7. Measure results in real time.
8. Identify the facts that need to be measured.
9. Avoid looking or sounding too defensive and resist being drawn into a situation that could weaken the position of the business corporation during the crisis situation.
10. Speedy communication is essential, especially with the media and the public” (Pedraza, 2010, pp. 11-14).

Besides these applications from the business sector, the other important thing you can do pre-crisis is advocacy. A solid definition of advocacy in relation to libraries is "organizing community residents and others to promote the library, its services, and its overall importance in the community" (McClure, Feldman, & Ryan, 2007 p. 139). Libraries can no longer rely on the idea that communities see the library as this great equalizer held in their minds (and hearts) in high regard. Libraries must be constantly

putting their message out to their communities on their relevancy, importance, and contribution to their communities (Singh & Trinchetta, 2020). Use every opportunity to get in the print and television news for positive things. Use your social media. Publicize the libraries service and the number of people served. Get quotes from people about their personal library experience and publicize it. Make close connections to key community members—invite the alderman or council member to read at the library, have important business leaders do workshops, have members of the library board do talks, etc. Make close connections with library regulars. Value and utilize the library's Friends Group. Be sure that they are some of the libraries strongest supporters and understand inclusive service to the community. Get to know the people on the library board or other governing body. Present the successes of the library to them every chance that is given. Have regular library attendees speak and present about the positive things at the meetings—or at the very least share video clips with them. Share information on “library basics” and tenets with them. If there is any way to have input on the library board make up, give it.

Lastly, talk about intellectual freedom in a way that makes it appealing to library users. Talk about how it protects their right to choose for themselves and keeps other people from choosing for them. Make it part of your everyday conversations, and use language that does not include library buzzwords and library branding. Create posters (Image 1 and Image 2), bookmarks, and branding saying, “Protecting your choice of books,” “You do you! We’ve got your READS,” or “Whatever search you need help with? Find it here!,” or other non-library language to get the public to understand and value intellectual freedom and rights of access without the field's buzzwords. Having these conversations pre-crisis are essential, especially if the library plans on being ready for that censorship crisis on the horizon.

Reading Resources on Advocacy & Crisis Management:

Barker, K. (2017). Creating a unique brand for your school library: Values, vision, voice, and visuals: Increasing your library's visibility as a form of

advocacy. *Young Adult Library Services*, 15(3), 31–35.

Cowell, J. (2021). Managing a library service through a crisis. *Library Management.*, 42(4/5), 250–255. <https://doi.org/10.1108/LM-10-2020-0158>

Kendzior, N. (2021). My turn: How do you think about library advocacy? *ILA Reporter*, 39(2), 14–16.

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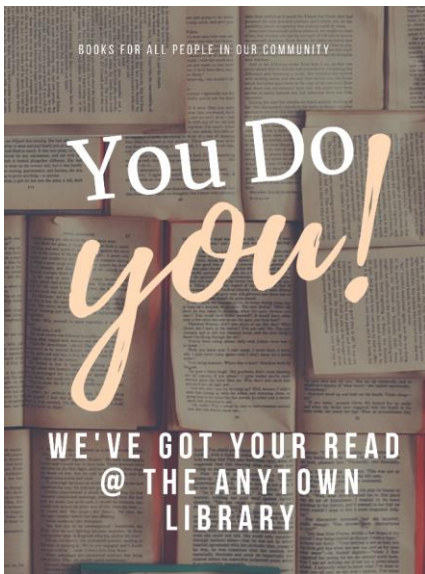


Image 1: “You Do You” (created using Canva)

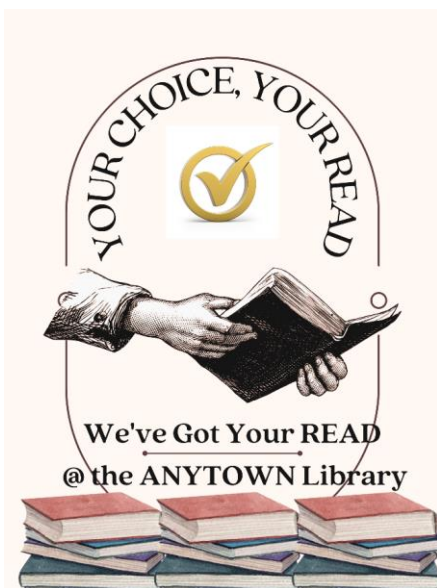


Image 2: “Your Choice, Your Read” (created using Canva)

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