

Letter

To the Editor,

C&RL and Ronald Bukoff, author of "Censorship and the American College Library" (*C&RL* 56 [Sept. 1995]: 395-407), were not well served by your editorial readers. The article could and should have been much improved if its conclusions were to be given credence on such an important topic. As it is, the statement that "censorship is . . . flourishing in American college and research libraries" cannot be regarded as proven and should not be further disseminated as fact.

The statistical basis for the study is weak. The survey sample of 110 colleges (much less the actual sixty-eight respondents) is too small to be taken seriously, and the author provides no indication of what the level of expected error is, a minimum requirement. He indicates a misunderstanding of sampling work by saying in his conclusion that "one-third of the libraries surveyed" experienced censorship. Not so: one-third of his sixty-eight respondents reported censorship. The author also fails to address the high likelihood that nonrespondents will be less likely to have experienced censorship.

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But what is censorship? In such an article one would hope for a working definition (did he give one in his survey instrument? we don't know). Censorship may be variously defined as official attempts at suppression or as any individual expression of a viewpoint hostile to another's world view. As it turns out, Mr. Bukoff includes all of these as well as simple vandalism in his count of censorship events, and in fact, these latter acts turn out to be his largest single category. This is not helpful if we want to analyze coldly the more dangerous encroachments of official suppression. But for this author "it is not always easy to say" what is censorship even when, in the quoted instance, he is describing a title withdrawn "because of the faculty member's strong views in opposition to the ideas found in the book." An author this unsure of his ground should be helped to refine his views.

The author laudably tried to make his study comparable with earlier studies in academic libraries. A similar effort would be valuable in carefully defining censorship, and also perhaps in using such data to compare censorship in academic libraries with that in public libraries. Our received wisdom is that there is much less in college libraries; Mr. Bukoff could do us a service next time by telling us whether or not this is true.

Let me add that I found Paula De Stefano's article on use-based selection for preservation, in the same issue (409-418), engrossing, well written, and persuasive; an excellent piece.

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