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## Lobbying and Political Advocacy: A Review of the Literature and Exploratory Survey of State Library Associations

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# Lobbying and Political Advocacy:

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## A Review of the Literature and Exploratory Survey of State Library Associations

A.J. Million and Jenny Bossaller

### Abstract

This article discusses lobbying and political advocacy within librarianship and present findings from an exploratory study of state library associations. Each state has a library association that works to advance the profession, the interests of its members, and library services. Articles about lobbying and political advocacy comprise only a small part of the literature on librarianship, but advocacy is crucial for maintaining and advancing library services. To fill this gap in the literature, we provide an introduction to library advocacy, describe the associated policy landscape, and evaluate literature discussing libraries and lobbying. Next, we report findings from our study. We conclude by discussing these findings and focus on how political issues might affect libraries, lobbying and advocacy in Library and Information Science education, and other issues mentioned by our study participants.

### Introduction

State library associations are professional groups, and they offer members continuing education and networking opportunities, spaces to discuss problems, and a group to advocate on their behalf. In that vein, most state library associations have a legislative committee. Legislative committees keep librarians abreast of legislative actions that affect libraries and users. They often issue calls for action, such as calling/writing to representatives around the time of crucial votes, organizing advocacy days with legislators, or creating educational materials for the public and their representatives. Such legislative committees, thus, provide a crucial link between libraries, users, and decision-makers.

Articles about lobbying and political advocacy comprise only a small part of the scholarly literature in Library and

Information Science (LIS), although there are many articles about library funding. There are also several advocacy toolkits that have been created by groups like the American Library Association (ALA) and state library associations to help librarians engage with public decision-makers and the public more generally. Other toolkits and publications help librarians, library users, and state library associations advocate for libraries (Sweeney and Chrastka, 2018; Sweeney, Chrastka, and Aldrich, 2017). Scholarly articles on advocacy cover topics such as coordination by library interest-groups across political boundaries (Jaeger et al., 2017), test advocacy strategies (Rollins, 2005), and classify eras in government-library relations (Jaeger et al., 2013). However, no known study documents national library advocacy practices at the state and local level.

To fill this gap in the literature, we surveyed the legislative chairs of state library associations and Chief Officers of State Library Associations (COSLA) to learn how and with whom members engage in advocacy, how they prioritize work, and how they establish priorities. Examining these practices is important because the ways librarians and their associations' advocate may influence policy and funding outcomes. Therefore, to that end and in this paper, we touch on the history of library advocacy, the policy landscape, and literature discussing libraries and lobbying. Next, we report findings from our study while drawing attention to efforts led by state library associations on behalf of libraries, librarians, and library users. Last, we conclude by discussing our findings with attention paid to the distributed nature of library advocacy that mirrors the political subdivisions of the United States (U.S.). Using these findings, we address the issue of lobbying and political advocacy in LIS education.

## Background

Political advocacy is often difficult for librarians. Historically, librarians have made claims about their neutrality to win and sustain popular support (Sparanese, 2008). Neutrality here means representing “all sides” of an issue, and this is linked to a sense that libraries should not alienate the public by engaging in partisan politics (Byrne, 2003; McMenemy, 2007). Arguably, neutrality allows libraries to exist as fairly noncontroversial publicly funded agencies, seen as a positive social good (Horrigan, 2016). Librarians and their associations do advocate for issues that are political and partisan, though. For instance, funding, inherently tied to politics, is a perennial issue. Intellectual freedom issues arise periodically, and net neutrality has been a recent politically divisive issue that librarians have weighed in on. In 2018, the ALA spent \$310,298 lobbying public officials (Center for Responsive Politics, 2019). The concept that libraries and education should be available for all (thus publicly funded) is ingrained in professional education. Who convinces legislators to fund libraries most effectively, though? Benefactors, the public, or librarians themselves?

Notable benefactors, from Thomas Bray at the turn of the 18th century (Harris, 1999), Andrew Carnegie in the 20th, through Bill Gates in the 21st, have been responsible for building library infrastructure while also providing an impetus for local investment. However, in the United States, public libraries truly exist by the will and the power of the people. In the mid-1800s, New Hampshire was the first state to enact a law to provide for public libraries. Massachusetts followed in 1851, and the City of Boston opened its public library as “the crowning glory of our system of City schools” (Boston Public Library, 1852, p. 21). Women’s groups lobbied at the local level for education and established many public libraries, especially across the Midwest during the Progressive Era (Parker, 1997).

Librarians have also been advocates for libraries since they formed professional associations. In the late 1800s, for example, the American Library Association gave librarians a collective voice. Joeckel (1935) describes

ALA’s efforts to create a federal library agency and provide aid to libraries, while he lamented a lack of national planning and coordination to create stable and equitable funding for public libraries. In 1945, ALA established a Washington, D.C. office dedicated to representing library interests (Molumby, 1996). In the mid-20th century, federal funding was granted to complete several studies including the Public Library Inquiry that prompted the expansion of national library services. The 1956 Public Library Service and Minimum Standards, the 1964 Library Services and Construction Act, and 1966 Minimum Standards were all products of lobbying by the ALA. In the 1970’s, two White House Conferences on Library and Information Services were held to garner public funding and ensure that all citizens can access library services (Implications, 1981).

A 1975 *American Libraries* article, “The Persuaders,” explains that librarians were “the most effective lobbying [group] in the entire education community” (p. 648), finding success by aligning their efforts with that of primary, secondary, and post-secondary educators. Their “solid and nonpartisan,” “painstakingly compiled and written” reports presented a “unified front” in the face of an unsupportive administration (p. 648). Eileen Cooke, an ALA lobbyist, explained that she was careful not to put libraries in competition with educational services as this weakened the lobby altogether. Another White House Conference on Library and Information Services convened at the behest of Congress in 1991, and this conference emphasized libraries capacity to promote literacy, workforce productivity, and democracy in the face of changing technologies (Bush, 1992). During this time, Patricia Schuman is credited with launching ALA’s first national media advocacy campaign (ALA, 2014).

ALA-supported standards and policies have traditionally focused on national issues, but as Jaeger et al. (2017) point out, “From the beginning, library funding programs [...] were opportunistic but lacked a clear and coherent national policy on public librarianship” (p. 352). Political disagreements about what should be delegated to state and local governments often complicated efforts to

procure national funding. Martin and Lear (2013) note that “the history of many state libraries is intertwined with the stories of state-level library associations and with county and public libraries. Historically, state governments, library associations, and county or public libraries all shared an interest in public library development, professional standards, interlibrary cooperation, and grant funding” (p. 4). These shared interests have shaped ALA’s lobbying efforts, but it may be that some issues are best addressed at the state and/or local levels. To negotiate tensions like this, ALA maintains a Chapter Relations Office that facilitates communications among the states and other ALA units, often working in consultation with staff in Washington, D.C.

Jaeger et al. (2013) define four distinct phases of public library development: the local years, the wartime years, the funding years, and the intervention years. The present era is characterized by federal intervention in library affairs without increased funding, either from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) or other public agencies. In response to federal intervention in libraries and increasing competition for funds, the ALA and the Public Library Association (PLA), among other groups, have developed advocacy toolkits, and some have stepped up their lobbying efforts.

The ALA may be the primary national lobbying arm for librarians, but state library associations and grassroots activists are responsible for addressing state and local issues. State library associations, in particular, are active in communicating national trends to librarians while tailoring communications to their constituents. Aside from library associations are “Friends of the Library” groups and nonprofits like EveryLibrary, which is the “only national organization dedicated exclusively to political action at a local level to create, renew, and protect public funding for libraries of all types” (EveryLibrary n.d., para. 3). Reflecting on the current policy and funding landscape for libraries, Jaeger et al. (2017) argue “there has never been a better time to craft a strategy for protecting – and maybe even increasing – library funding by working in a coordinated manner

across state and local governments” (Jaeger et al., 2017, p. 351).

### **Professional Associations and Lobbying**

The Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1995 defines lobbying activities as, “contacts and efforts in support of such contacts, including preparation and planning activities, research and other background work that is intended, at the time it is performed, for use in contacts, and coordination with the lobbying activities of others” to influence the government. Lobbying is often understood as activities carried out by paid individuals – lobbyists represent interest groups in exchange for compensation. However, the reality for libraries and their stakeholders is far more complex. Among paid lobbyists, there are in-house lobbyists employed by a single firm, group, or association who work exclusively for their employer. There are also outside lobbyists employed by lobbying and consulting firms that represent client portfolios. Finally, grassroots lobbyists are citizen-activists who lobby the government alone or under direction from an outside entity (IRS, n.d.).

In librarianship, professional associations play a key role in directing lobbying of all types, whether for funding-related issues or other matters of relevance to the public. Harvey (2004) defines a professional body or association as “a group of people in a learned occupation who are entrusted with maintaining control or oversight of the legitimate practice of the occupation” like librarianship. Professional associations act as a “safeguard of the public interest” (Harvey, Mason, and Ward, 1995), and many groups of this type are granted tax-exempt status by the U.S. government for this reason.

Take, for example, the ALA, which is a 501(C)3 nonprofit organization. 501(C)3s are a class of tax-exempt organization dedicated to religious, charitable, scientific, literary, or educational purposes that further the public interest. The U.S. tax code prohibits 501(C)3s from maintaining their tax-exempt status if they dedicate a “substantial” part of their activity to influence legislation (IRS, 2018). To determine what counts as substantial, nonprofits can elect to take the 501(h)

expenditure test, which caps lobbying activities at 20% of expenditures, up to \$1,000,000, with no more than a quarter dedicated to grassroots lobbying (ALA, 2008).

Complementing groups like the ALA, 501(C)4 and (C)6 organizations, among others, also lobby on behalf of libraries and in the public interest. 501(C)6s are tax-exempt organizations meant to improve industry conditions. Unlike a 501(C)3, however, 501(C)6 groups like the Idaho Library Association can engage in politics without losing their tax status (ALA, n.d.). One requirement of 501(C)6 groups is that political activities relate to commonly held business interests (e.g., lower taxes), and 501(C)4 social welfare organizations can lobby or participate in political activity so long as it does not exceed 50% of their total expenditures. Acknowledging that ALA is not equipped to lobby or advocate at the state and local level, state library associations typically act to fill this void.

### Library Legislation and Funding

Libraries and their stakeholders can lobby elected officials and the public for a variety of purposes, but the most common reason is to shape legislation that pertains to funding. Reflecting the history of libraries in the U.S., library-legislation and funding sources are equally diverse. Below, we provide a snapshot of library funding sources and other notable policy issues.

From the federal level, most library funding comes from IMLS. For instance, the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) authorizes IMLS to administer the Grants to States Program, which is the “largest source of federal funding support for library services in the United States. [...] Each year, over 2,500 ‘Grants to States’ projects support the purposes and priorities outlined in the LSTA” (McCook, Bossaller, and Thomas, 2018, p. 116). These grants fund partnerships with community organizations, digitization projects, bookmobile services, outreach, and more. Funding allotments are calculated using a minimum amount specified by law (pp. 115-141) and population figures

provided by the U.S. Census Bureau. The majority of money is distributed to state libraries who administer awards to local libraries.

LSTA includes two provisions that require states and localities to adequately fund libraries in order for them to remain eligible for federal aid. First, IMLS (2015, p. 1) requires that LSTA grant funding is complemented by 50% matching funds from state governments. Second, LSTA includes a “maintenance of effort” requirement which says if state and local library funding drops below the average of the past three fiscal years, then a state becomes ineligible for LSTA dollars (pp. 2-3).

Although IMLS funding supports libraries nationwide, it accounts for a small portion of total library revenue. In Federal Fiscal Year 2015, combined national spending on public libraries totaled \$12.4 billion. Less than half a percent came from federal sources, while 9% came from state governments and charitable organizations. Most notably, however, about 85% of all public library revenue came from local governments (IMLS, 2018, p. 6). This suggests most efforts to advocate for funding must take place at the grassroots level.

*American Libraries* provides a snapshot of ballot initiatives that summarizes recent efforts to raise funding through municipal taxes in its annual Referenda Roundup. Ford notes that “American Libraries, in partnership with the Public Library Association, tracked 146 library referenda across 33 states” during the November 2018 election (para. 1). In 2018, for example, they reported nearly 80% of library referenda passed including two statewide wins: “In Maine, voters approved a \$15 million bond to upgrade facilities including library services at its community colleges, while in New Mexico, voters authorized the state to sell and issue nearly \$12.9 million in general obligation bonds for several types of libraries” (para. 1). In Michigan, some 30 measures were approved, and many losses were by narrow margins. For instance, “it took just 113 votes to defeat a tax rate increase that would have yielded an estimated \$687,767 for Vineland (N.J.) Public Library” (para. 2).

Aside from their interest in funding, libraries and library associations are concerned with other policy issues. After 9-11, the U.S. PATRIOT Act presented “tremendous challenges for librarians” on practical and ethical grounds (Jaeger et al., 2004, p. 102). In response, the ALA Council (2003) passed a resolution that called on Congress to “provide active oversight” of the law’s implementation, “hold hearings” to determine its effect on library users, and amend the law as necessary to protect citizen rights (para. 14-15). More recently, ALA mobilized to oppose the elimination of IMLS (Wright, 2015) with strong support from state library associations (e.g., Karshmer, n.d.) and applauded the nomination of Dr. Carla Hayden as Librarian of Congress (Gravatt, 2016). At the state and local level, libraries remain interested in policy issues like K-12 school districts adequately funding libraries (Sparks and Harwin, 2018), legal threats to eliminate programming (Myers, 2019), and pressure from outside groups to remove books from circulation.

### **Lobbying and Political Advocacy Literature**

Lobbying and political advocacy are discussed in LIS literature, but there is no known study documenting library advocacy practices nationally and at the state or local level. Two recently published books by EveryLibrary’s Sweeney, Chrastka, and Aldrich (2017) and Chrastka and Sweeney (2018) provide guidance to librarians, library staff, and their stakeholders about how to campaign for political funding support. A pair of peer-reviewed journal articles written by Jaeger et al. (2013; 2017) brought attention to the relationship between librarianship and political advocacy at the national level. Mentioned earlier, the first article argued that an ideal strategy for groups lobbying on behalf of library funding is to focus their efforts at the state and local level while coordinating efforts across political boundaries. The second article proposed four eras in libraries, policy, and politics with the aim being for U.S. library advocates to better assert library contributions to democracy.

Attention paid to lobbying and political advocacy is neither a recent phenomenon nor is it limited to the United States. Looking back, in 2008, the International

Federation of Library Associations and Institutions hosted a “President’s Workshop” about how to draw policy-maker attention to libraries (Schleh, 2008) demonstrating that advocacy is a global topic. Smith (2008) discussed advocacy for libraries in a variety of international contexts while touching on the issue of LIS education and accreditation standards. This volume supplemented other work published in the 2000s including a New York lobbying case study (Borges, 2005), a doctoral dissertation examining lobbying strategies used by the Alabama Digital Library (Rollins, 2005), and a management-focused article by Meraz (2002) for public library administrators.

Library advocacy literature has focused on practical guidance for librarians that can be used at the grassroots level (e.g., Abbott-Hoduski, 2003). School or public libraries dominate the literature because they operate with public funds (Halsey, 2003), and this means academic or special libraries are less discussed. As noted above, Rollins’ (2005) doctoral dissertation evaluated lobbying and state legislator perceptions in Alabama, and she found that lobbying was effective in shaping funding allocations. Nevertheless, even in publications that provide guidance to librarians, library advocates, and library supporters, it does not appear attention has been paid to documenting contemporary practices. Examining these activities may help identify opportunities to strengthen librarians’ collective voice, shape policy, and improve LIS education related to advocacy.

### **Research Methods**

To fill a gap in the literature by documenting lobbying and advocacy practices nationwide, we surveyed the legislative chairs of state library associations and COSLA representatives. These individuals possess knowledge about library funding, legislative process, and lobbying, and they often collaborate with state libraries and lead association advocacy efforts. State libraries are responsible for distributing federal funding and administering grants, while state library associations bridge federal and local organizations. Associations may also coordinate and sustain lobbying and advocacy efforts separate from ALA.

### Questions

This study sought to answer five interrelated research questions:

1. How do state library associations conduct and encourage lobbying and political advocacy?
2. How do associations' legislative committees set priorities?
3. When do legislative committees employ professional lobbyists and invest in advocacy?
4. Do committees avoid partisan politics (and how)?
5. Do the chairs of legislative committees believe it should be a priority for LIS programs to teach students about advocacy?

### Data Collection and Analysis

We identified all study participants through COSLA and state library association websites. In February 2019, we distributed an online survey to the chairs of legislative committees or library association presidents if the association had no legislative committee, and COSLA representatives. We also sent three rounds of emails to our target audience, and then we sent the survey to other legislative committee members if our target members did not respond.

Our survey contained quantitative and qualitative questions that were organized into six areas: how advocacy is carried out, perceived differences between advocacy and political advocacy, agenda-setting, the use of lobbyists, political partisanship, and education for advocacy in LIS (see *Appendix A*). Thirty-five respondents representing thirty-one states (including Washington, D.C.) completed our survey for a 61% response rate. Of the responding associations, twenty-

two were 501(C)3 organizations, eight were 501(C)6s, and three registered as both. *Table 1* shows the tax classifications of the library associations that responded to our survey, which we provide because federal law shapes how and when they can advocate. We discuss this influence in our findings.

The data we collected lent itself to hand-coding using inductive reasoning to find themes in the data (Saldaña, 2016). Additionally, we looked for themes based on tax classifications and the limits they impose on lobbying and political activities. Most of the data we analyzed was qualitative, and because twenty states did not respond to our survey, the results were not nationally generalizable. That said, our data revealed trends and provided information to guide future studies. This made it appropriate to keep all survey responses, even though respondents did not answer every question.

### Findings

Our most noteworthy finding is that no single model described every state library association's lobbying and political advocacy. Some associations limited the scope of their work to focus on state issues, while others advocated at the federal and local levels as well. Some states hired lobbyists, but others did not. Advocacy training methods varied. For instance, some associations organized advocacy boot camps and others trained the public to speak out via social media on their behalf as part of media campaigns. A few associations reported clear processes to set organizational priorities. Priorities, resource availability, and the law all shaped how associations advocated.

Table 1. Tax Status Survey Respondents\*

State	Tax Status	State	Tax Status	State	Tax Status	State	Tax Status
Alabama	501(C)6	Idaho	501(C)6	Missouri	501(C)3	South Carolina	501(C)3
Arizona	501(C)3	Illinois	501(C)3	Montana	501(C)3	South Dakota	501(C)3
California	501(C)3	Iowa **	501(C)3, 501(C)6	Nebraska	501(C)3	Tennessee	501(C)3
Colorado	501(C)6	Louisiana	501(C)3	New Jersey **	501(C)3, 501(C)6	Texas	501(C)3
Connecticut	501(C)6	Maine	501(C)6	New Mexico	501(C)3	Utah	501(C)3
Delaware	501(C)3	Massachusetts	501(C)3	New York	501(C)3	Vermont	501(C)3
D.C.	501(C)3	Minnesota **	501(C)3, 501(C)6	Ohio	501(C)6	Wyoming	501(C)6
Florida	501(C)3	Mississippi	501(C)3	Oklahoma	501(C)3	---	---

\*Data from the GuideStar (n.d.) database of U.S. nonprofit organizations.

\*\*Has an affiliate organization Affiliates are registered nonprofits that lobby and advocate on behalf of libraries separate from a state library association to enjoy greater flexibility.

### How do state library associations conduct and encourage lobbying and political advocacy?

Our survey asked how state associations advocated for the profession, individual libraries, and library users. Most of our respondents (n=23) framed their response in terms of library services and users rather than advocating for the profession. Some examples respondents brought up included fighting proposals cutting taxes for library services and construction, the arts, and reductions in state aid. One respondent described fighting a bill requiring the election of library board members. National issues that affect libraries and library users, such as net neutrality, rural broadband, and copyright transfer were also listed as priority items. Several respondents mentioned campaigns supporting their state libraries and archives.

A lower priority for most respondents was advocating for the profession, but three prioritized salaries and continuing education. Five said that an effective method of advocacy was coordinating school and public librarians to lobby state legislators; fourteen respondents said that schools hiring qualified, credentialed K-12 librarians was a top priority. One respondent explained that in the past year their legislative committee had fought a proposal to make school librarians optional. The committee wrote letters, testified to the state legislature, and built alliances with school districts to defeat the proposal.

The causes of restrictions on association advocacy were not always clear, and this bears mentioning. For example, advocating for the profession was allowed in some states but not everywhere. One respondent said that she advocates for the profession “every day” but another said advocacy was prohibited. Most states limited advocacy to set activities, and one respondent said why: “We are not allowed... our role is to facilitate discussions between library types and library organizations.” This suggests legal requirements like a prohibition on 501(C)3 organizations from engaging in partisan politics may have been a factor, although association priorities and resource limitations were also constraints. Indeed, nine respondents said they intentionally limited efforts to the state level, though fourteen said they could advocate for individual libraries or districts. Ten respondents said they engage with larger, national issues, and some reported sending groups to Washington D.C. for National Library Legislative Day. Nevertheless, it was more common for associations to lobby or advocate in state capitols because of a lack of funding and time to travel.

Several respondents who said their association does lobby or advocate for individual libraries provided examples of what they sought to accomplish. For instance, one state described providing legal support to a library that straddles the Canadian border, because it was a meeting spot for separated immigrant families. Legal support for libraries experiencing censorship problems came up three times, in response to 1) anti-LGBTQ+



legislation, 2) blocking EBSCO databases, and 3) “anti-obscenity” legislation. Respondents described asking for help from supporters, such as EveryLibrary, public library directors, state intellectual freedom committees, state librarians, and lobbyists to address these problems.

*How do associations’ legislative committees set priorities?*

There were varying methods to set priorities, but the top priority for legislative committees was, unsurprisingly, funding. Respondents described looking to ALA, lobbyists, and their state librarians for guidance about national issues, and their members to report local problems. Some states took more proactive approaches (e.g., hosting an annual legislative forum to solicit advice from their members) than other states. One respondent said their legislative committee was responsible for creating an advocacy priority list, but the association’s board made final decisions. Another said the question we asked about prioritization was “loaded” because their process is “through the committee and platform development process [but is] more accurately based on what is most achievable according to our paid lobbyist.” In other words, committees set goals, but these goals were not always achievable. Reflecting this, a third respondent said their association set priorities and tried to stick with them, but they have to stay nimble – two more said lobbyist oversights created problems for libraries in their states, and yet another reported they had to shift gears to fight a bill that would raise materials delivery costs.

*When do legislative committees employ professional lobbyists and invest in advocacy?*

We also found that state library associations hired lobbyists and worked with a variety of professional groups (e.g., teachers), individuals, and organizations to build support networks and accomplish advocacy goals. Respondents mentioned working with library trustees, grassroots volunteers, students, business owners, and members of the public with community connections, as well as formal organizations like Friends of the Library groups, state libraries, the American Association of University Women, the League of Women Voters, and

political action committees. Such individuals and groups were able to facilitate collective action with associations through activities like visits to legislators at Library Advocacy Day, phone calls, and letter-writing campaigns. One participant said they worked with legislators to craft bill language when their legislature was in session. Nine respondents said that ALA’s advocacy tools (e.g., Engage, Libraries Transform) were useful, and other technologies, such as websites, email, and social media helped library stakeholders work together. That said, in general, library associations’ investment in lobbying and political advocacy appeared to be opportunistic, based on the resources at committees’ disposal.

Because not all states had resources at their disposal, coordination with like-minded allies was a workaround. One state, for instance, reported being able to find legal aid from the American Civil Liberties Union. Eight other states mentioned working with EveryLibrary to pass municipal referenda, and one respondent said: “During our fight to reinstate EBSCO, we partnered with EveryLibrary who placed a paid petition on Facebook that generated thousands of emails from Utah citizens direct to the [... state education board] asking them to overturn their decision to block EBSCO.” Another respondent said they were interested in partnering with other organizations, but “there is a bit of fear in doing so... to have an outside group come to the state, [... that brings] a fear that this is not the way [we] like to do things, even though it could be beneficial.” Quotes like these suggest bringing in outside groups may help library associations to accomplish their goals, but the optics may be unfavorable.

Finally, the majority (n=20) of our respondents invested in lobbying and political advocacy by hiring lobbyists. While thirteen associations did not have a lobbyist, nine hired one part-time, six hired one full-time, and five employed more than one full-time lobbyist to communicate directly with legislators. These lobbyists worked at the state level, and the tax statuses of the groups we studied fit with lobbying patterns: seventeen

501(C)3s paid fewer than one lobbyist, but 501(C)6s and those with affiliate groups often (n=6) had one or more.

*Do committees avoid partisan politics (and how)?*

Most of our respondents said they avoided partisan politics, and this reflects a commitment in librarianship to neutrality. For example, one respondent said, “Our focus is on libraries, championed by members of both sides of the aisle.” Another respondent elaborated by saying: “We try to be as neutral as possible and create messages that can be embraced by both parties.” Three respondents said they were careful to avoid doing anything that could be construed as partisan, because “we do not talk about party politics in meetings or via email.” A fourth person said, “We never use partisan language or call issues ‘Democratic’ or ‘Republican.’” Eighteen of these respondents spoke on behalf of 501(C)3 associations, which are by definition, nonpartisan.

Despite good faith efforts to remain neutral, some respondents said that certain issues are inherently partisan, and this cannot be avoided. One individual said, “It is easier to find alignment with Democrats [than Republicans]” and another reiterated this point: “We try to stay neutral, but lean left.” Respondents did not say why their association leaned this way, but a likely explanation is librarians held liberal views about gun control, censorship, and net neutrality. Gun control is a partisan issue, and many librarians have advocated to keep guns out of libraries. Another respondent said that a county commissioner tried to remove a library’s “Ask me about LGBTQ Materials” buttons and displays, which turned into a partisan fight; the profession’s resistance to censorship was at odds with the religious beliefs of the commissioner. Net neutrality and broadband expansion were also divisive issues because librarians defined them in terms of equity, a stance aligned with the Democratic Party. Funding, too, can be seen as partisan; anti-tax groups aligned with the Republican and Libertarian parties generally resist increasing funding for public institutions.

Finally, the alignment of associations that we studied should not be taken as an indication they were biased or

wanted to engage in partisan politics. Aside from trying to avoid politics, most of our respondents said they try to seek out common ground with those whom they disagree. One respondent said they always “thank legislators regardless of support” and members normally keep associations from becoming ideological. Speaking about this, a second respondent said that “with a large association, there are enough checks and balances and opposing view- points to keep people from going too far into ‘left’ or ‘right’ field.” This indicates most state associations leaned to the left in only relation to issues that affected libraries.

*Do the chairs of legislative committees believe that it should be a priority for LIS programs to teach students about advocacy?*

Respondents were generally in agreement that librarians should be taught to lobby or engage in political advocacy: twenty-five (80%) said that advocacy should “definitely” be taught in LIS programs, and six provided more tentative answers – three answered “probably yes,” two “maybe,” and 1 “probably not.” The respondents who responded “maybe” or “probably not” said that while advocacy is important, it is best learned on the job or at the state or local level, indicating advocacy education may require tailoring to fit local needs.

Nevertheless, our respondents did say that all librarians should understand how libraries are funded, and that students must learn to speak publicly about libraries’ worth, value, and relevance, because libraries will always be in competition with other causes. LIS programs train managers and leaders, and anyone in a leadership position is responsible for directing communications about what libraries accomplish and the resources they need to serve the public. Respondents also said that issues like privacy, intellectual freedom, and civil rights matter for ethical reasons, so advocacy education is about much more than the work librarians accomplish. Indeed, as one respondent put it: “Teaching new librarians that they can be neutral is ridiculous... our job is to teach our communities how to be a part of the democratic process, so we need to understand it ourselves as a core competency.”

## Discussion

This study was exploratory, but we can still draw four themes from our data:

1. Library advocacy is best framed in terms of users;
2. Legislators require continuous education about the issues that affect libraries;
3. Libraries depend on political support; and
4. Association advocacy strategies vary dramatically from state to state.

These generalizations are not surprising, but nevertheless, they provide a basis to discuss the high and low points of this study. There is no avoiding that librarians may benefit from political advocacy, but we also found that librarians rarely advocated for the profession itself. In response to our question, “Can you recall a time when the association advocated for the profession?” respondents typically framed advocacy in terms of issues that affected the public or library users’ ability to access information. Only 3 respondents mentioned specific examples of increasing staff or pay, continuing education, and school librarians.

Respondents recognized the importance of the collective voice that associations provide in elevating issues that matter to libraries, as well as the communities they serve. Our data revealed that associations varied in how they operated. However, we also found, as suggested by Jaeger et al. (2017), that joining with other groups, like teachers unions, school library associations, and others amplifies association voices, both in communicating with the public and policy-makers. This means coordination efforts among library interest groups benefits libraries and their stakeholders *everywhere*. Several respondents did say they appreciate ALA’s advocacy and communication at the national level, but state-level efforts were stymied by a lack of coordination or time. ALA’s Policy Corps (2019) is a recent initiative that aims to train cohorts of library advocates to, “build capacity for the library community to develop and sustain strategic advocacy efforts” (para. 1) and it may address the lack of

state resources we found. However, it remains to be seen how national capacity-building will advance state and local advocacy efforts.

Another interesting finding is that our study participants reported using re- active and proactive strategies in their lobbying and political advocacy efforts. Ideally, the role of legislative committees is to inform librarians, and the public, about policy issues and then elevate the importance of these issues to legislators. A few of our study participants said they do not set legislative priorities, but instead react to legislation that might harm libraries. At the other end of the spectrum, some said they work with lobbyists, legislators, and contacts in the ALA Washington Office to stay abreast of the political landscape, and then they craft and communicate priorities to legislators. Participants listed partners like state libraries, library association boards, and others who inform committee prioritization efforts.

Two topics came up that were related to library districts and resource sharing. Libraries often devise methods of resource sharing that do not fall within standard political subdivisions. For instance, small or rural libraries may collaborate with their state library to provide administrative support using IMLS funding (Million and Bossaller, 2015). These systems are not always well understood by the public, and a lack of understanding may cause problems. A few respondents said legislators understood the work municipal and county libraries do, but not the structure of their tax districts. Because legislators may not understand how libraries are funded, this potentially subjects them to fallout from larger fights about government spending (Braum, 2017). For example, in Kansas legislators needed aggressive feedback from librarians to prevent the end of “public library service as [... Kansans] now know it” (p. 19). Based on our findings, and cases like these, librarians should be prepared to defend, in simple terms, library services that are not well-understood by legislators and the public, including the funding mechanisms that sustain libraries.

Finally, another problem that arose in this study was illustrated by the emergence of divisive political issues including rural broadband expansion, net neutral- ity,

guns in libraries, and the inclusion or promotion of LGBTQ+ materials in library collections. Librarians can frame their advocacy positions as related to library users or democratic values, but individuals with different opinions about these issues can mistake disagreement for partisanship. Because disagreement in politics may be mistaken for partisanship, library advocacy can be risky.

Some libraries were given support from outside entities (e.g., EveryLibrary or the ACLU), but others said that they needed more training to advocate effectively. Skills taught in recent publications about library lobbying could be beneficial in helping librarians manage the risk associated with political advocacy (Chrastka and Sweeney, 2018; Sweeney, Chrastka, and Aldrich, 2017; Rollins 2005). Training should prepare librarians to speak to decision-makers at every level of government and give librarians ideas about how to cultivate grassroots support and build coalitions. However, these examples also demonstrate the value of an LIS education and continuing education: librarians should be able to recognize when and where advocacy is needed. Library associations, too, should consider finding ways to identify when political advocacy is necessary.

### Limitations and Future Direction

Our survey response rate was lower than we expected, but our findings show there is value in studying lobbying and advocacy, and a need for future research. Given the sensitivity associated with this topic, we feel that more success could be found if another survey were conducted by a national group such as the ALA. We also have questions about the influence of state politics that might account for variation in our survey responses. For example: Is there more advocacy in states with strong labor unions? How strong is the correlation between tax status and association advocacy? We could have answered these questions but did not because our findings would have been misleading due to our study sample size.

Several participants did imply they operate under rules about for whom they can advocate. For instance, some states said they could not advocate directly for the

profession, but others were able to lobby for higher salaries. Additionally, state associations seemed to operate under different rules than one another; some advocated on behalf of individual libraries or library districts, while others said they could not. Likewise, some associations were vocal about national issues. This brings up an unresolved problem: Are associations constrained by tax-status, resources, and their missions, or did the politics and laws of states constrain associations' ability and willingness to engage in politics? We do not have sufficient data to answer this question, but we believe it is important for future research to examine in detail.

Another limitation to this study is some of the individuals who responded to our survey were volunteers, too busy to respond, or new to their roles. This limited the ability of respondents to answer survey questions. To overcome this limitation, we recommend creating focus groups in future studies, for each state, with multiple association members. Even members who do not serve on legislative committees would be able to fill gaps in knowledge about library advocacy.

### Conclusion

State library associations and their members have diverse needs; however, based on what we found in our survey, some could use more assistance with their advocacy efforts. As one participant observed, librarians will always need to fight for funding in the presence of other worthy causes. If librarians believe that libraries and the services they provide are worthy of support, then they must remain vigilant and advocate for themselves. To that end, some of the "best practices" we can glean from this study are:

1. Set annual priorities by tracking legislation that might affect libraries or their users. Work with state librarians and maintain an informed legislative committee that is willing to push an agenda through communication with legislators and the public.
2. Communicate priorities regularly, using different channels as needed.

3. Create and maintain close relationships with legislators who can craft and fight bills that will impact library users. Educate policy-makers about how their decisions will affect communities.
4. Make an impact by working with like-minded groups and allies. Create a unified force that provides mutual benefit to all parties involved.
5. Be prepared to shift gears when necessary, and remain nimble in the face of changing priorities.

In the U.S., public libraries are funded almost entirely by local taxes, but laws that affect libraries exist at the local, state, and federal levels. The relationships librarians cultivate with legislators and the voting public is crucial. Librarians, from reference desk staff to library directors and administrators need to remain educated about issues that affect libraries and their users so they can justify the services they provide and money they spend. Topics of education, in LIS courses and on-the-job, include everything from how libraries are funded to issues such as broadband expansion and net neutrality. Staying abreast of relevant issues like these will ensure librarians can advocate for their patrons and communities where necessary. Future research should explore how to accomplish this most effectively nationally and at the state and local level.

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## Appendix A: Survey Instrument

### Association

In which state do you live?

*Dropdown list.*

### Advocacy

Can you recall a time when the association advocated for the profession? If so, please describe it below. Discussing advocacy more generally is also fine.

*Text box.*

Can you recall a time when the association advocated on behalf of specific libraries and/or library districts? If so, please describe it below. Discussing advocacy more generally is also fine.

*Text box.*

Can you recall a time when the association advocated for library users and other stakeholders (e.g., schools, teachers)? If so, please describe it below. Discussing advocacy more generally is also fine.

*Text box.*

### Mobilization

How does the association mobilize its members for political advocacy (e.g., lobbying actions)? Specifically, describe with whom the association works and how it coordinates advocacy efforts within the association and among its members.

*Text box.*

Does the association work with citizens who are not librarians as part of its political advocacy efforts? If so, please describe how.

*Yes (with text box), No, Not sure.*

## Advocacy Details and Types

Are there differences between the association's political advocacy at the state/local level and the federal level in terms of who is involved, motivations, and tactics. If so, what are these differences?

*Text box.*

What are the association's legislative and/or lobbying priorities for the coming year?

*Text box.*

How do you prioritize your legislative and/or lobbying efforts from year to year?

*Text box.*

Can you describe a time when the association was forced to change its legislative and/or lobbying priorities? If so, please describe this time.

*Yes (with text box), No.*

## Lobbying Investment

How many full-time professional lobbyists does the state library association employ or support?

*None, Less than one (part-time), One, More than one.*

Are there other ways that the association invests in its political advocacy efforts? If so, please list them below.

*Yes (with text box), No.*

## More Advocacy Details

Can you recall a time when groups outside of the association (e.g., EveryLibrary, the NEA) lobbied on behalf of libraries within your state? If so, when?

*Yes (with text box), No.*



Do you feel that the association is non-partisan in its political advocacy efforts? Briefly explain why or why not this is the case.

*Yes (with text box), Maybe (with text box), No (with text box).*

Can you recall a time when politics created problems for libraries, librarians, or library users in your state? If so, please briefly describe this situation.

*Yes (with text box), No.*

In the past five years, has the association advocated for anything at the federal level? What about the state level? If so, please provide examples below.

*Text box.*

### Advocacy Education

Do you think that LIS programs should teach students how to engage in political advocacy? Briefly describe why you chose your answer.

*Definitely yes (with text box), Probably yes (with text box), Maybe (with text box), Probably not (with text box), Definitely not (with text box).*

How does the association educate librarians, members, and library users about its advocacy efforts (especially political advocacy)?

*Text box.*