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Advocacy Campaign: Rights, Education, Access, Democracy (READ)



Social Issue Background

Book bans, in some form or another, have been present in America dating back to the 1600s. However, the formality, institutionalization, and written procedures around book bans we see today did not exist historically. Thus, what we consider to be “book bans” today were often practices of burning certain texts, refusing to print certain texts, or even as extreme as outlawing the carrying of certain texts. Though different from modern-day book bans, all these practices have the commonality of censorship at their core. At present, book bans have specific consequences such as limiting books students can read, and thus, perspectives they are exposed to. Our campaign seeks to combat book bans, in effect, preserving free speech and the ability of K-12 students to read a multitude of texts.

To effectively assess the acuteness of the book ban issue, we must explore the history of the practice in America. According to the “Smithsonian Magazine” podcast, in an episode titled “A brief history of banned books in America,” the first-ever book banning was of a text written by a man named Thomas Martin. It was banned by the Puritans for its criticism of their practices. Multiple such cases existed. Writer Erin Blakemore wrote a piece for National Geographic that

also explores the history of book bans in America. She gives an example of an early book ban: In 1650, a pamphlet titled “The Meritorious Price of Our Redemption” by William Pynchon was burned publicly and banned. This was because of its argument that Christian salvation came from obedience to the Christian God, which contradicts the Puritan Calvinist teachings that God “chose” people for salvation. Pynchon was called a heretic, and there are only four surviving copies of his pamphlet. Several different situations similar to these two occurred in the early days of America.

During the Civil War period, anti-slavery content was suppressed. In some cases, enslaved people were even barred from reading the Christian Bible for its content depicting God calling people out of slavery. Blakemore discusses the 1851 Harriet Beecher Stowe book, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, which was publicly burned and banned because it “aimed to expose the evils of slavery” (Blakemore). One man was imprisoned for ten years as a result of owning or carrying the book. Similar bans occurred during this time and into the 1860s, all attempting to suppress anti-slavery ideals. The Jim Crow South was also a “hot bed for book censorship” (Blakemore). Different groups attempted successfully to ban textbooks about the Civil War era that were not sympathetic toward the South’s loss.

Moving later into the 19th century, Blakemore highlights that there was a round of content banning, all related to what was supposedly called “immoral” content. In 1873, the Comstock Act made it illegal to own or mail texts deemed “obscene” or “immoral.” This mostly included content regarding sexuality and birth control. Margaret Sanger’s pamphlet “Family Limitation” was banned for encouraging the use of birth control. Comstock laws remained in place until 1936. Boston, in particular, was known for its wide banning of this “obscene” or “immoral” content.

In more recent history, PEN America utilizes its “FAQ” page to specifically explain what the term “book ban” refers to. According to them, “A book ban occurs when an objection to the content of a specific book or type of book leads to that volume being withdrawn either fully or partially from availability” (PEN America). Note that a central aspect of the definition of a book ban is that the book is removed from institutions due specifically to content considerations. That said, PEN America also provides examples of what does not constitute a book ban. A book ban is not an internal decision about course offerings made by schools or districts, a book ban is not a decision made by educators about what books to teach in their classrooms, and a book ban is not a routine curriculum review or update made by schools or districts (PEN America). A book is considered banned when it is removed from students’ access due to objections relating to its content.

Several groups partake in attempts to ban books, and one particular group has had much success: Moms for Liberty. In an effort to explore the issue of book bans fully, our campaign would like to offer a sympathetic ear to such groups. Thus, we will make an attempt to fully understand their points of view. Moms for Liberty “is dedicated to fighting for the survival of America by unifying, educating and empowering parents to defend their parental rights at all levels of government” (Moms for Liberty). Their book bans are born out of that mission statement. USA Today reports that Moms for Liberty utilizes a rating system originally coming from a database called “BookLooks” (USA Today). A document has circulated that appears to be created by Moms for Liberty, where they directly address being accused of being “book banners”:

We do not want to burn books or take them out of circulation. If a parent believes their child should have access to these materials, they can check them out at a public library or purchase it. We are simply asking that sexually explicit, vulgar, and/or obscene materials

not be available within our public schools, where parents have diminished control of what their children can access or read. (Moms for Liberty)

While these issues are surely sensitive topics for the groups looking to ban books, our campaign holds that book bans are ultimately a form of censorship, and thus, are not the correct avenue for groups experiencing the issues discussed by Moms for Liberty to take.

Our campaign holds that the freedom to read is a fundamental right. PEN America illustrates this important point: “Diminished access is a form of censorship and has educational implications that extend beyond a title’s removal” (PEN America). The issue of book bans is ultimately a censorship issue and should be treated as such. Some consider book bans to be a trivial issue because students can access books in ways other than through their school. While this is an important fact, it misses a few critical issues for students. As PEN America puts it, “There is...no guarantee that students will have easy or equitable access to books in other locations, have money to purchase a book, or even know a book exists” (PEN America). PEN America has counted over 10,000 book bans across America since 2021. This issue necessitates immediate action.

Vision and Values

The overarching vision of our campaign is to raise awareness and spread information about the adverse effects that book bans can cause, specifically in states such as Alabama, Florida, and Texas, which are communities within the broader umbrella of Southern states. Our advocacy campaign hopes to be a resource for students and teachers in these regions by providing educational resources about the impacts of book bans. We hope to outline how students and teachers can contact local representatives in Southern states to call for action and help facilitate protests and other methods of exercising freedom of speech. This campaign strives to be education-focused on our efforts. We want to ensure that teachers, parents, educators, and

policymakers understand how book banning can hinder critical thinking and how the lack of exposure to diverse perspectives can impair students' ability to think critically. We strive to provide locally impacted communities with the resources to express their dissatisfaction with book banning and help them use their voices to call on their local lawmakers to call for change. This campaign aims to have adaptable resources for each state to ensure specific needs are met. We hope to always take care and be thoughtful when addressing these particular needs.

We do this because our mission is to protect intellectual freedom in reading diverse literature, combat educational censorship, and, more broadly, support libraries and schools. Protecting intellectual freedom is based on allowing children in classrooms to read literature written by authors of various backgrounds with multiple perspectives. The exposure to diverse literature combats the ability for censorship in the educational system, giving students the ability to hear different voices on an issue. These values push us to advocate for those impacted in the classroom, such as the attack on students' ability to learn freely and teachers' ability to educate about various topics. We hope that book banning will not be permitted in any classroom, specifically in vulnerable states such as Florida, Alabama, and Texas. We aim to emulate other campaigns positive initiatives, such as Ready Freely Alabama and, at large, PEN America's advocacy efforts, such as protecting students, empowering writers, enhancing resilience, and being vibrant in spreading core values.

Issues Specific to the Community

Within local communities, specifically Florida, Alabama, and Texas, there are concerns amongst people that books should be banned to protect children from "inappropriate" content. This "inappropriate" content disproportionately targets books discussing race, LGBTQ+ topics, and topics covering "sexual" content. However, grassroots communities, such as the group Read Freely Alabama, counteract this way of banning books. This group highlights how book banning

in their state harms freedom of expression; it silences voices and brings personal beliefs into the educational system (Chapoco). Within these communities, specifically in Alabama, there is concern about bringing in ideological presumptions surrounding books. There is also concern about these presumptions having a tangible impact on the books in the classroom (Chapoco). Grassroots activists in Florida also hold the same concerns (Brown). The Association for the Study of African American Life and History believes that freedom lies within the pages of books; hearing different perspectives from people with different backgrounds makes America so rich in perspectives (Brown).

Additionally, students within Texas are echoing their sister Southern states' concerns about letting personal perspectives shape learning. Student activists in Texas are concerned that removing minority and LGBTQ+ voices from libraries and schools could be moving Texas backward (Park). These students highlight that removing perspectives can cause identity issues among youths and silence voices (Park). Local communities in these specific states impacted by book bans all hold the concern of book banning within their states, silencing voices. At the same time, our campaign does not seek to change the minds of those who favor banning books. We strive to aid these local communities in expressing their concerns about book banning and give them tools to call on decision-makers in their community and advocate for change.

Goals

An outline for the overarching goals for our advocacy campaign:

1. Warning about the adverse effects of book bans, including:
 - a. Elimination of diverse perspectives
 - b. Hindering critical thinking
 - c. Censoring the freedom to read

2. Mobilizing educators, students, and parents to take action in addressing book banning in their schools. In doing so, we will:
 - a. Provide resources to students and educators impacted by book bans in Texas, Florida, and Alabama
3. Calling the community to action against book bans, prompting them to:
 - a. Read banned books
 - b. Contact local authorities, including representatives and legislators
 - c. Participate in planned, peaceful protests our group seeks to organize

Key Messages

When crafting our key messages, we wanted them to be simple yet impactful. With our campaign focusing on education and the freedom to read, we knew our key messages needed to follow those ideas. The following are the messages we created and why:

1. Education, Not Erasure
 - a. When books are banned, the valuable ideas they hold are often erased. Topics in these books—challenging or not, controversial or not—offer key teachable moments that help develop critical thinking skills, especially for kids.
2. Freedom to Read is a Fundamental Right
 - a. Education, literature, and free speech—these are three of the core values our country was founded on. Banning books takes away people's freedom to explore diverse ideas, perspectives, and experiences through books. Without the right to read and explore diverse literature, people will suffer.
3. Banning Books is Censorship, Not Protection
 - a. Again, revolving around education, removing books from schools and libraries limits access to knowledge. For students to grow and succeed, they need to be

able to explore all the ideas these books have to offer. Instead, their education is being censored; they are learning what a select few people want them to learn.

Together, these key messages serve as the foundation of our campaign to protect intellectual freedom and resist censorship. We aim to inspire meaningful dialogue and collective action around the issue of banned books because, ultimately, this campaign is not simply about books. It's about defending the right to learn, question, and grow in a free society.

Audiences

Our campaign strives to provide Southern state teachers, students, and parents with resources. We wish to reach teachers and students who have the heart to advocate for the ending of book banning in southern states, with a focus on Alabama, Florida, and Texas. This campaign is also aimed at teachers in the K-12 system to advocate for them to be able to teach without book barriers. Likewise, we strive to inform students about the negative impacts of book banning on their K-12 education. We also aim to reach parents of K-8 children to allow them to be a voice for their children's educational freedom. We strive to get local media, as we want to gain more media coverage on book censorship in the classroom and how that explicitly impacts Texas, Alabama, Florida, and Southern states at large in the broader context of the United States. We also wish to garner support from local librarians and reach them in our advocacy efforts.

Theory

One theory that affects our campaign's decision-making is the behavior change theory. In their 2024 article, Sood et al. define social and behavioral change communication, which is related to behavior change, as "the strategic use of communication to promote changes in individual knowledge, attitudes, norms, beliefs, and behaviors, interpersonal communication, as well as community-level action" (Sood et al. 18).

Social and behavioral change communication impacts how we have crafted our messages and materials. For instance, it has been critical that we take a persuasive tone when writing to our audience, especially as we seek to encourage action against book bans in Texas, Florida, and Alabama. It is also key that we anticipate common counter arguments to our talking points, seeking to understand the beliefs of those who disagree with us to present our views effectively. In doing so, we can advocate for our beliefs in a polished, convincing way, using our materials and messages to create the social and behavioral change we desire.

It is also important to acknowledge that social and behavioral change communication relies strongly on interpersonal communication and community-level action. These are both areas that we prioritize in our campaign, particularly given the importance of working with like-minded communities to create tangible change. To that effect, we seek to work with other organizations who stand for similar ideals, including the American Library Association, Read Freely Alabama, and other organizations mentioned in the “Potential Partnerships” section. By working with organizations like these across the three states we seek to target, we will help create community action integral to inspiring social and behavioral change. Also, by maintaining strong interpersonal communication with those groups, we will establish connections with other activists who actively advocate against book bans. Doing so will help us create a network of advocates, improving our advocacy overall.

Another communication theory that impacts our campaign’s decision-making is agenda-setting theory, which refers to the “mass media’s ability to select and call to the public’s attention ideas, events, and people” (Wood & Hains 215). Like social and behavioral change communication, this theory directly impacts our advocacy campaign. Because we intend to get communities involved in advocating against book bans in Southern U.S. states, we must

recognize the power of mass media to change opinions and call attention, helping advance our views and advocacy.

Specifically, through our op-eds, social media content, and a webpage that outlines our views, we seek to attract attention from the mass media, including traditional media like newspapers, magazines, and television news. This fits with the agenda-setting theory because mass media coverage often influences what draws the public's attention and the issues at the forefront of its mind. So, by increasing coverage of our anti-book ban advocacy in mass media, we will spread our message to a larger audience, providing resources for educators and students as we do so. Doing so will draw the public's attention to the issue while furthering our advocacy and views.

Beyond that, the call-to-action element of the agenda-setting theory also applies to our advocacy campaign. Specifically, we intend to aid in organizing and planning protests in areas affected by book bans, as outlined in our campaign goals. Organizing protests will also help draw the public's attention to the issue while spreading our message further.

Overall, it is clear that the social and behavioral change and agenda-setting theories apply to our advocacy campaign. By recognizing these theories, our group can more effectively promote our message and views.

Communication Activities

In creating our advocacy campaign, we have sought to incorporate many types of communication activities. Doing so allows us to spread our messages more effectively, helping us reach a larger audience. Highlighted below are some of the communication activities our campaign is pursuing.

One communication activity that we intend to incorporate into our advocacy campaign is planned protests. Specifically, we will engage local community members and other advocacy

groups (as outlined in the potential partnerships section) in planned, peaceful demonstrations at the states most affected by book bans, including Florida, Texas, and Alabama (PEN America). Doing so would help raise awareness about book bans, including their adverse effects.

Another communication activity we will incorporate is teach-ins. Teach-ins are events that provide students and faculty, particularly at colleges, with the opportunity to meet to discuss and debate specific topics (Poorvu Center). Our group particularly seeks to sponsor these teach-ins at large universities across the American South, specifically in Florida, Texas, and Alabama. Doing so will help raise awareness about book bans, encouraging individuals who oppose them to join the fight against them while teaching about their harm. This approach will rely on partnerships with local advocates against book bans (see “Potential Partnerships”) to assist in educating others about ways to get involved. Though we recognize that college campuses are not often impacted by book bans, we believe there is value in educating college students about their harm, potentially making them advocates in their communities and former school districts.

Beyond that, our group intends to use social media and the creation of Little Free Libraries to disseminate our views. Specifically, our campaign will maintain active profiles on multiple social media sites to advertise our events and provide resources to those who want to take action against book bans. We also intend to create and fill Little Free Libraries across Florida, Texas, and Alabama with banned books, as encouraging the reading of banned books is another way of fighting bans. Incorporating these activities will help our campaign spread our message further.

Our group will also incorporate live panel discussions into our advocacy campaign. We will stage these discussions with partners and fellow advocates against book banning in a handful of school districts in Florida, Texas, and Alabama impacted by book bans. This would include

authors whose books have been banned, many of whom have become advocates against book bans. Some potential school districts that we would host these live panels in include Clay County, Florida, which led the state in book bans in 2024 (WUSF), and Conroe, Texas, which banned 106 titles in the 2023-2024 school year (Dallas Observer). Through staging these discussions, we hope to educate community members about the harms of book bans and share resources to combat them.

List of Potential Partnerships

Our campaign seeks to align itself with organizations we believe will bring additional elements into the campaign that we do not already have. These elements are mostly related to increased connections with individuals who have experience with book bans or access to a greater scope of research than what we could organize.

- American Librarian Association:
 - “ALA compiles data on book challenges from reports filed by library professionals in the field and from news stories published throughout the United States” (American Librarian Association).
 - The ALA will fit into our campaign by providing access to research on book bans. We will benefit from being connected more directly to librarians who are part of the association.
- Authors whose books have been banned & librarians:
 - We invite authors whose books have been banned and librarians to connect with us during our campaign. We believe that we will benefit from these connections, as they will provide a specific example of what we advocate for.
- Read Freely Alabama:

- “Read Freely Alabama supports, connects and mobilizes parent and community member-led initiatives fighting against censorship and book bans” (Read Freely Alabama).
- This organization will benefit our campaign by providing a greater knowledge of book bans and related issues specific to one of our focus states, Alabama. Additionally, they will fit into our campaign by providing a more direct connection to other entities in Alabama.

- PEN America:
 - PEN America is an organization dedicated to protecting freedom of expression for writers (PEN America).
 - They will fit into our campaign by providing resources and information on book ban research, and they will benefit our campaign by enabling us to present relevant information or statistics on book bans.

Timeline

When designing the timeline for our campaign, we wanted to take a unique approach. Since our campaign focuses on children, teachers, and the educational impact of book bans, we decided to have our campaign run through the summer (June, July, and August). Within these three months, we were able to plan multiple events and promote our campaign to our target areas. Here is a [link to the calendar](#) that has the dates for our planned events.

As you can see, we have five types of “content” for this campaign: social media, planned protests, teach-ins, panel discussions, and Little Free Library launches. Additionally, you can see the full spread of our campaign. We chose to begin on June 1st as it is typically associated with summer break, meaning our target audience will be out of school. We chose to end on August

31st because the end of August is typically associated with the end of summer break, meaning our target audience will be back in school. Finally, you will see that our first month is more content-heavy than event-heavy. This is to provide our audience with information about our campaign, what they can expect from us, and what they can do. After that, we lean heavily into events to engage our audience. Let me give a breakdown of all our content:

1. Social Media: Highlighted on the calendar in blue, we intend to use social media not only to promote our events but also to have small campaigns. These campaigns are designed for people who might not be able to attend an in-person event but still want to make a difference in their community.
2. Planned Protests: Highlighted on the calendar in purple, these planned, peaceful protests come at the end of an event. With the freedom to read being a fundamental right, we intend to help citizens use their First Amendment rights to ensure that education is preserved and not erased.
3. Teach-Ins: Highlighted on the calendar in pink, these teach-ins come at the beginning of an event. They aim to provide students and teachers with the opportunity to meet to discuss and debate specific topics (Poorvu Center). We are hosting multiple of these to educate students and teachers in Texas, Alabama, and Florida about book bans.
4. Panel Discussions: Highlighted on the calendar in orange, these discussions also take place early on during events (day 1 or 2). These discussions happen with authors who have had their books banned, many of whom have become advocates against book bans. Through these discussions, we hope to educate community members about the harms of book bans and share resources to combat them.
5. Little Free Library Launches: Highlighted on the calendar in green, these come at the end of an event. Our goal with these launches is to create Little Free Libraries and fill them

with banned books. By doing this, we not only encourage reading, but we encourage reading banned books, which is another form of peaceful protest.

By creating this timeline of events, we can not only plan our campaign fully but also ensure that we are targeting our intended audience and engaging with them in meaningful ways. After all, banning books is censorship, not protection, and we want to ensure we are doing all we can to end book bans.

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