

ALA American Library Association

Office for Intellectual Freedom

April 5, 2019

Hollins University
President Pareena G. Lawrence
7916 Williamson Road
Roanoke, VA 24020

To President Lawrence and the Hollins University Board of Trustees:

We write to ask that you reverse the recent decision to temporarily remove online access to some issues of *The Spinster*, the Hollins yearbook. Denying access to the yearbooks, even on a temporary basis, constitutes a restriction on access that violates the basic tenets of the American Library Association's *Library Bill of Rights*, which counsels that library and archival materials should not be proscribed or removed because of a fear of controversy or because of partisan or doctrinal disapproval. Removal of archival materials from an institutional repository, if done to conceal truthful material about an institution's past, constitutes an erasure of the historical record. It is a form of censorship that impairs our ability to provide accountability for the past, and change and improve society in the future.

While it is laudable that President Lawrence took action "to limit the damage and pain those depictions might cause in our community," removing the materials from public view hides the truth about our history from contemporary society and does nothing to address the harms suffered by historically marginalized people and groups.

Best practice counsels that, rather than removing or expurgating materials with racially sensitive content, libraries should continue to provide access while offering additional materials to provide context and background for those materials. Hollins' professional library staff and the members of the Working Group on Slavery and Its Contemporary Legacies possess the skills and knowledge to accomplish this task in a manner that conforms with professional ethics, academic freedom, and fidelity to the historical record. We urge you to trust their expertise and provide them with the time and resources needed to provide a context for the racially sensitive material in the yearbooks while fulfilling the institution's responsibility to keep archival materials accessible to the university community, scholars, and the public.

Access to all research materials, irrespective of format, should be provided in accordance with a clearly defined and publicized institutional access policy, written in conformity with professional standards like Society of American Archivists' "[Core Values and Code of Ethics](#)"

[for Archivists](#),” the “[ACRL Code of Ethics for Special Collections Librarians](#),” and the “[ACRL/SAA Joint Statement on Access to Research Materials in Archives and Special Collections Libraries](#).” Such policies should include a process for addressing problematic materials that allows for deliberation and input from all affected students, scholars, librarians, and community members. As advised in “[Intellectual Freedom Principles for Academic Libraries: An Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights](#),” which has been endorsed by the American Library Association, the Association of College and Research Libraries, and the American Association of University Professors, “[a] procedure ensuring due process should be in place to deal with requests by those within and outside the academic community for removal or addition of library resources, exhibits, or services.” Objections to materials are best addressed through a reconsideration policy that provides a means for addressing the concerns of the objector in accordance with the library’s mission and policies and in consultation with the librarians and archivists who are well-acquainted with their professions’ best practices, codes of ethics, and responsible and sensitive handling of cultural materials.

We strongly encourage you to follow the guidance of the University Library and the Working Group on Slavery and its Contemporary Legacies, and make the affected volumes of *The Spinster* electronically accessible again, accompanied by the statement that acknowledges the nature of the content in the yearbook, states the institution’s position in regards to that material, and promises to provide the necessary educational materials that will provide needed context for viewing those materials. We extend our full support to the staff of Wyndham Robertson Library and the Working Group on Slavery and its Contemporary Legacies, who have demonstrated their commitment to preserving full access to the library’s collections and upholding their professional ethics and values.

Sincerely,



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