



LC Drops “Illegal Alien” Subject Heading Decision provokes backlash legislation

Thanks to the joint efforts of a student group and university librarians at Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH, with a push from the American Library Association (ALA), the Library of Congress (LC) announced on March 22 that it would remove the term *Illegal alien* from the LC Subject Heading (LCSH) system, replacing it with *Noncitizen* and, to describe the act of residing without authorization, *Unauthorized immigration*.

“Illegal aliens” will become a “former heading,” cross-referenced with the new terminology; other headings that include the phrase will be revised or canceled. This decision currently stands despite recent backlash: members of the U.S. House of Representatives have voted to attach language to a funding bill that would require LC to switch back to the original term, but the bill is not yet law.

The replacement of the subject head-

ing was the culmination of a two-year process that began when Dartmouth student Melissa Padilla noticed what she felt were inappropriate terms while researching at Dartmouth’s Baker-Berry Library in 2013 for a paper on undocumented students. While working with research and instruction services librarian Jill Baron, Padilla told *LJ*, she realized that nearly every article or book she looked at was categorized with the subject heading “Illegal aliens.”

This had particular resonance for Padilla, a Latin American studies and film major who had been undocumented herself until enrolling at Dartmouth.

Padilla brought up the issue at a meeting of the Coalition for Immigration Reform, Equality, and DREAMers (CoFIREd), a newly formed nonpartisan student organization dedicated to

advancing the rights of undocumented students at Dartmouth.

The group approached Dartmouth librarians, who agreed to meet with CoFIREd representatives. Their answer, said Padilla, was daunting: the subject headings were part of the national LC cataloging system and could not be changed within the Dartmouth library. Library staff did point out, however, that other LC subject headings had been changed—predominantly terms now perceived as racially insensitive, or the change from “Insane” to “Mentally ill”—and offered to work with the student group to put together a proposal asking LC to change the terms.

The Dartmouth librarians were well positioned for the task; the Baker-Berry Library is a member of LC’s Subject Authority Cooperative Program, which enables member institutions to submit subject heading and classification number proposals. Baron, cataloging and metadata services librarian John DeSantis, and research and instruction services librarian Amy Witzel proposed that the students gather documentation to prove that *Illegal aliens* is not a preferred term and to find evidence that better terms—such as *Undocumented immigrant*, which was their initial suggestion for a replacement—were in common use.

Requested, reconsidered

The students worked throughout the rest of the school year to compile information from media sources, government websites, reference materials, online sources, data-



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bases, and indexes. In summer 2014, DeSantis submitted a formal request to LC.

In February 2015, after consulting with staff members, LC responded in a public memo stating that it would not change the wording because the phrase *Undocumented immigrant* is not directly synonymous with *Illegal alien* and not all undocumented people are or intend to be immigrants, and authoritative sources for legal terminology still use the term *Illegal aliens*.

Tina Gross, associate professor and catalog librarian at the St. Cloud State University, MN, and an acquaintance of DeSantis's, galvanized various divisions and affiliates of ALA, including the Subject Analysis Committee, Social Responsibilities Round Table, and REFORMA (the National Association To Promote Library and Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish Speaking). Together, they formulated a resolution asking LC to reconsider the request.

In January, at the ALA Midwinter Meeting, ALA Council passed a resolution calling on LC to change the subject heading to "Undocumented Immigrants." LC still saw the substitution as problematic but

agreed to convene a formal stakeholder meeting to examine the issue.

Representatives from the Law (Cataloging) Section, the Law Library of Congress, the Congressional Research Service, the Cooperative and Instructional Programs Division, and the Policy and Standards Division met with Beacher Wiggins, LC's director for acquisitions and bibliographic access, in February. Participants determined that the "Aliens" heading would be revised to "Noncitizens," and, in lieu of "Illegal aliens," "Unauthorized immigration."

Politicizing the issue

However, in April, conservative Republicans on the House Appropriations Committee introduced a provision calling for the term's reinstatement into the report accompanying a bill for FY17 funding for legislative branch agencies such as LC.

HR 4926, also known as the Stopping Partisan Policy at the Library of Congress Act, directs LC to retain the headings "Aliens," "Illegal aliens," and related headings. Its sponsor, Rep. Diane Black (R-TN), cited the revision as

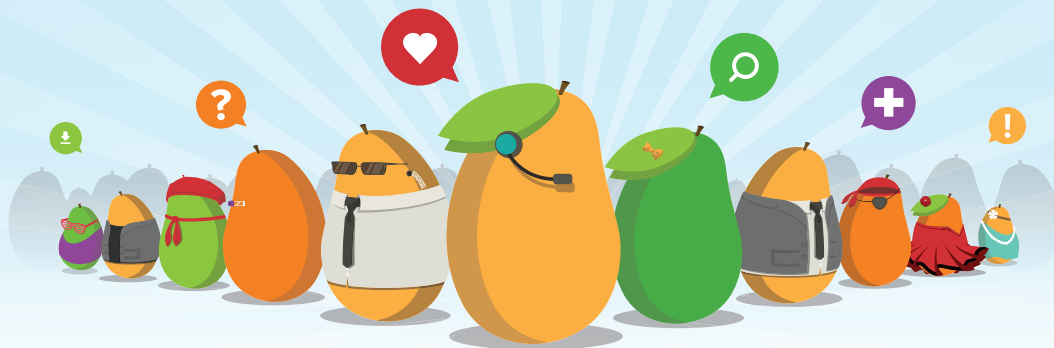
"needless policy change" that would ultimately cost taxpayers money.

Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-FL), the ranking member of the Legislative Branch Subcommittee, countered with an amendment to the report, requesting that the changes stand. This was supported by Appropriations Committee ranking member Nita Lowey (D-NY) and other members of the minority, as well as by a joint letter, entered into the record, by the chairs of the Hispanic, Black, and Asian Pacific American Caucuses of Congress. However, the amendment failed narrowly in a 24–25 House panel vote on May 17.

Although the Senate's version is not expected to include similar language, and it remains unclear whether the appropriations bill will make its way through Congress before its session adjourns at year's end, the provision is still a matter of concern for many stakeholders.

But regardless of the bill's ultimate fate, the work accomplished by the Dartmouth students sets a powerful precedent for instituting civic change at a grassroots level.—**Lisa Peet**

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