

Information & Library Science Department Master Lecture by Michael Lambert Explores Library Governance and the Value of Intellectual Freedom

Campus focus

At 1:10 p.m. on November 24, the Department of Information and Library Science hosted a master lecture at the Ching-Sheng International Conference Hall, inviting Michael Lambert, Director of the San Francisco Public Library (SFPL), to speak on “A Library for All: The Present and Future Vision of the San Francisco Public Library.” Drawing on his leadership of the SFPL’s main library and 27 branch libraries, Lambert shared how he has built a resource-rich and diverse urban library system, attracting nearly 130 faculty members and students.

Born in Seoul, South Korea, and raised in South Carolina, USA, Lambert jokingly described himself as “not a bookworm,” yet recalled how he instinctively categorized comic books by publisher as a child. While working as a library stack attendant during college to support himself, he began a library career that has spanned over 30 years, encompassing a range of responsibilities, from moving books and telling stories to fixing light bulbs and managing multimillion-dollar budgets. In 2000, inspired by photographs of California in a magazine, he traveled across the United States to settle in the San Francisco Bay Area. He later served as Deputy Director of Library Services in San Mateo County and as a regional manager in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, before returning to San Francisco as Deputy Director in 2014. In 2019, he became the city’s first Asian American library director.

“Many people assume the San Francisco Public Library has always enjoyed prestige, but in 1990 it once faced the threat of closure,” Lambert revealed. In 1994, San Francisco voters approved the Library Preservation Fund through a tax increase to save the library system. The latest renewal of the fund, effective in 2022, extends for 25 years, allowing for budget planning through 2048. The SFPL’s total budget for fiscal year 2026 will

reach US\$163 million, including US\$21 million for book acquisitions. Combined with annual million-dollar donations from the Friends of the Library foundation, the system is able to keep all 28 libraries open year-round, with annual circulation exceeding 14 million items.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Lambert reassigned 800 of the library's 874 staff members to pandemic response efforts, assisting with the placement of homeless shelters and food distribution. After the pandemic, the SFPL announced the permanent elimination of overdue fines. Within two years, library card registrations increased by nearly 10 percent despite broader downward trends. "We don't want fines—we want readers back," he emphasized.

Addressing the rise of book bans, Lambert stressed that libraries must defend intellectual freedom and reject all forms of censorship. Library collections, he argued, should represent a diverse range of genders, ethnicities, and political perspectives. He cited initiatives such as the Drag Queen Story Hour launched in 2015, which later became a nationwide movement, and recalled facing public pressure in 2022 for standing up for Jewish library staff. "Intellectual freedom is not a slogan," he said.

"It is a daily balancing act, like walking a high wire."

Lambert also highlighted cooperation with Taiwan as a key achievement. Since establishing a sister-library partnership with the New Taipei City Library in 2015, the SFPL has engaged in ongoing collaboration, including internship exchanges and Mandarin summer programs. He extended an invitation to Taiwanese colleagues to attend the 2028 American Public Library Association annual conference, stating, "Bring Taipei's experience to the Bay Area—we need more Asian perspectives."

When asked whether AI would replace librarians, Lambert responded wittily, "Librarians who use AI will replace those who do not." He added, however, that machines cannot find shelter beds for the homeless or offer comfort during moments of fear faced by immigrants. Therefore, he concluded, "treating data science as a tool while placing humanity at the core" is a crucial competency for future librarians.

At the close of the lecture, Lambert surprised the audience with an

improvised rap set to 1980s hip-hop rhythms and shared his personal motto: “Libraries are not buildings they are the heart of the city. When the world breaks apart, we stitch it back together with stories.” He reminded faculty and students that, regardless of technological change, as long as libraries continue to respond to human needs, their role in democratic societies will only grow more important.



