Changing Academic Libraries' Cultures and Empowering Minority Employees in a DEI World

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ABOUT USD

- A Roman Catholic University
- Strong emphasis on liberal arts
- Ranked #1 most beautiful campus on The Princeton Review
- Ranked #4 in participation in study abroad among Doctorate-granting Universities by the Institute of International Education (2019/20)
- U.S. News & World Report ranked USD as one of the top 100 universities in the nation
- Earned the Ashoka U designation as a Changemaker campus, one of only 44 universities in the world to earn this distinction
- Student enrollment (Fall 2022): 5,669 Undergraduates, 2,336 Graduate/Paralegal
- 810 Law/JD Graduate
- Five Schools, Law School, and the College of Arts & Sciences
Anti-Racism Defined

Ibram X. Kendi in How to Be An Antiracist defines antiracist as:

“One who is expressing the idea that racial groups are equals and none needs developing, and is supporting policy that reduces racial inequity.”

INTRODUCTION

The travesty of our profession is that we have not learned how to hire and retain librarians of color or how to create organizational structures that these librarians can feel comfortable in and respected.
WHITENESS DEFINED

Robin DiAngelo in her article “White Fragility” in The International Journal of Critical Pedagogy cites Frankenberg (1993) who defines Whiteness as multi-dimensional:

“Whiteness is a location of structural advantage, of race privilege. Second, it is a ‘standpoint,’ a place from which White people look at ourselves, at others, and at society. Third, ‘Whiteness’ refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed.”

WHITENESS DEFINED

Michelle Fine in “Witnessing Whiteness” said:

“I find myself trying to understand how whiteness accrues privilege and status; gets itself surrounded by protective pillows of resources and/or benefits of the doubt; how whiteness repels gossip and voyeurism and instead demands dignity.”

DEMOGRAPHICS OF LIBRARY PROFESSION

“The Department for Professional Employees AFL-CIO in its ‘2023 Library Professionals: Facts and Figures’ states ‘The librarian profession suffers from a persistent lack of racial and ethnic diversity that has not changed significantly over the past 15 years.’”

DEMOGRAPHICS OF LIBRARY PROFESSION

“Just over 82 percent of librarians identified as white in 2022. . . . In 2022, only 4.3 percent of librarians identified as Black or African American, a steep decline from 9.5 percent in 2020. Librarians who identified as Hispanic or Latino (of any race) numbered 8.0 percent, and those identifying as Asian-American or Pacific Islander made up 5.1 percent.”

DEMOGRAPHICS OF LIBRARY PROFESSION

“Women represented 82.2 percent of graduates in Master of Library Science (MLS) programs in 2018-2019. However, Black women only accounted for 4.5 percent of all MLS graduates, while Hispanic and Asian/Pacific Islander women made up 7.8 and 2.5 percent of the 2019 class, respectively.”

DEMOGRAPHICS AND STRUCTURE
THE PROBLEM

When we look at the context of libraries, the demographics of library workers, the fact that libraries adhere to best hiring practices, along with the collective failure of library leadership globally to diversify and retain librarians of color, I must ask this question: Are library organizational cultures and structures racists?
CREATING A NEW CULTURE
COOLEY LIBRARY

- Included diversity, equity, and inclusion in our mission, vision, and strategic plan.
- Ensured the playing field is level for all employees and promote professional development.
- Used organizational and individual librarian goals to move an organization forward (negotiate goals).
- Created a Collections, Access, and Discovery Department.
- Promoted engagement through cross-functional committees for librarians and staff.
- Created the Coordinator of Graduate Programs and the Coordinator of Instruction and Undergraduate Learning, which cut across the traditional structure lines to bring librarians together.
- Expanded the Dean’s Council to include key representatives from across the building.
- Hired an Associate Dean for Student Success and Diversity.
- Used the DEIA Committee to assist with diversity training, programming, and work.
- Supported a DEI collection audit that removed offensive cataloging headings.
- Reorganized the organization.
- Established an Artwork Committee to bring diverse art into the library building.
DEI ARTWORK
If you want to create a diverse, inclusive organization, you need to:

- Commit to creating a diverse, inclusive antiracist organization, and develop an action plan.
- Ensure your library’s mission, vision, and values statements mention diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- Diversify your management team with at least two ethnic librarians/people (change will start to happen automatically).
- Expand your management team meetings beyond Associate University Librarians (AUL) and alternate which non-AUL librarians are selected every two years.
- Consider implicit biases in your and other library employees’ decisions and disputes, especially when a librarian of color is involved.
- Give librarians of color the benefit of the doubt. Stop them when the AUL talks with you about the horrible librarian of color. If a POC librarian is upset, there’s a reason. They are not crazy. It’s a sign you should dig further. Invite the librarian to your office for a conversation.
- Meet with all new librarians as a group for one hour three times per year.
Ensure growth and development for all employees.

Ask a librarian of color to chair a committee or significant task force. This may mean not giving the task to an Associate University Librarian (AUL).

Provide opportunities for people from across the organization to collaborate.

Challenge hiring committee on choosing people like them.

Confront departments or AULs about a librarian of color revolving door syndrome. Demand accountability and change.

Use the Associate Dean or the DEI Committee to introduce readings and antiracists training to all library personnel.

Eschew putting a person of color in a dysfunctional department or assigning them to the library’s bully.

Learn about black and white styles and microaggressions.

Experiment with a new organizational structure to create more cohesion and inclusiveness.
MICROAGGRESSIONS

Racial microaggressions are subtle, denigrating messages directed towards people of color.
MICROAGGRESSIONS

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“BLACK AND WHITE” STYLES

In Classrooms “When blacks and whites engage each other in public debate about an issue, they are divided not only over content—the issue itself—but, more fundamentally, over process: how disagreement on an issues is to be appropriately handled.”

“The black mode—that of black community [inner city] people—is high-keyed: animated, interpersonal, and confrontational. The white mode—that of the middle class—is relatively low-keyed: dispassionate, impersonal, and non-challenging.”

LIBRARIANS OF COLOR
SURVIVING IN A DEI WORLD

If you want to survive and thrive in the workplace, you need to:

- Get a MENTOR.
- Learn about the library head or library’s reputation before accepting a position. Because you have been offered employment, don’t let your ego get the best of you. Tap your network. If you don’t have a network, ask pointed questions about the organization’s culture and inclusiveness during the interview.
- Select an organization whose mission statements mention diversity and inclusion.
- Negotiate for professional development during the hiring process. Invest in yourself (professional development) until you can get a job that will pay for it.
Understand that the academy is a place for privileged people (students and faculty). Become secure in who you are as a professional.

Stop focusing on naysayers and do your job. You do not need to be affirmed by others. The enemy incapacitates you when you pay attention to what they are saying.

Consider the spectrum of libraries for a career. You can work in a small or medium academic library, a research library, a public library, and a special library (rural vs. urban).

Serve on library committees and take “stretch” assignments. Don’t isolate yourself.

Join an ethnic caucus, a space for librarians like you, and identify a few white librarians (allies) who you can trust. You need both perspectives to grow and survive.

Move to get a better job. In the U.S. and perhaps other parts of the world it is necessary to move to get a job or promotion.

Seek a community on campus and off campus as soon as you arrive in a new town.

Learn the culture of your departments, library, and institution, and the written and unwritten rules of your library environment and university.

Avoid stereotype threat.
WHITE LIBRARIAN ALLIES

If you want an equitable and fair workplace, you need to:

- Give BIPOC librarians the benefit of the doubt.
- Serve as a mentor or invite a librarian of color to coffee or lunch. Stop by their office to periodically say hello.
- Participate in search committees with a goal of evaluating all candidates fairly and creating a comfortable environment for them during the process, especially for BIPOC candidates who don’t look like you.
- Avoid participating in white racial bonding acts. Speak up when you hear unfair judgmental statements about a minority colleague.
- Commit to being honest with a BIPOC colleague rather than cuddling them. Otherwise, you sabotage the librarian’s development.
Read the antiracists and librarians of color stories in the literature. This will help some, but the lived experiences of BIPOC cannot be replicated.

Pay attention to how women and BIPOC are treated in meetings.

Join your library’s DEI Committee or create one. We need white librarians on these committees.

Avoid being intimidated by BIPOC candidates or labeling them during the interview process.

Explain the profession and/or library organization to new BIPOC librarians and assist them with joining professional committees.

Volunteer to work in a minority community service organization to broaden your understanding of a different culture.

When you witness discrimination, don’t approach the victim later to offer sympathy. Give him or her your support in the moment.
A CALL TO ACTION: Globally libraries must dismantle our cultures, policies, and organizational structures to create anti-racist organizations if we want to retain librarians of color to meet our patron needs.
Kendi reminds us, “the heartbeat of racism is denial, the heartbeat of anti-racism is confession.”

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