**Meaningful Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility at a Large Urban Library**

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**Abstract**

Public libraries usually relegate their “diverse” programs offered during national recognized heritage months. Although we seek to be more universal in our offerings, DEIA work still centers on simply event programming and collection development.

To talk about meaningful EDIA work today however is acknowledging that true advancement goes beyond events and artifacts. We must evolve this approach to where DEIA values drive our professional development through (1) critical librarianship (2) outreach and (3) responsive evaluation.

The framework for DEIA at a large urban library has three pillars of focus. The first is our librarians. It is important that we acknowledge the work that already exists because to start to review DEIA as an institution without centering the voice of BIPOC staff is misguided. Our institutional knowledge grows through their work and informs all new DEIA initiatives.

Another pillar of DEIA at our library is to be addressed by developing a systemwide plan for outreach. Outreach at the library is incredibly important for many reasons but is also viewed as an optional service. When we are in the communities, it is our responsibility to activate the spaces we inhabit.

As Design Thinking is both mindset and process, it allows us to reframe issues in the library through programs, services, spaces and systems. Every instance of outreach is an opportunity to observe and reflect on our audiences and understand what we need to do as a library system that seeks to serve the entire city of Chicago.

But the effectiveness of our attempts at building a more equitable library system can be hard to measure. Developing a robust set of tools for evaluation that captures experiences of our patrons, staff and partners is the first step. Implementing interdisciplinary modes of evaluation is needed to accurately reflect the challenging work DEIA can bring. It is culturally misguided to attempt to quantify social and racial justice. All of society stands to benefit when libraries evolve to meet the changing needs of people in need.

**Introduction**

Diversity at the library means valuing the difference in people’s backgrounds, experiences, histories, cultures and beliefs. Equity in the library is acknowledging that Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC), disabled and LGBTQIA+ populations have been historically excluded and don’t have an equal opportunity in society. Equity involves enacting policies and taking actions to rectify those imbalances. Inclusion is about striving to be a welcoming place for everyone by ensuring right, safe conditions and channels for people to participate to their full potential. Being accessible means the library should always work towards making our collections, events and spaces easy to find, easy to understand and easy to access for people with different abilities and cultural knowledge.

It is important that whenever an organization uses the acronym “DEIA” as an adjective that it is clear that they start by defining exactly what is intended with those terms. If the organization has no answers to make clear the distinctions between diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility, it runs the risk of engaging in performative actions.

2020 Was Different

In 2020, many organizations, business and government entities started to revisit DEIA. At the same time, the BIPOC staff at those organizations shared a collective sigh. This work is not new and most certainly did not start in 2020. Such members of the staff have long practiced being *seen* in their workplaces by doing twice as much work, sometimes in multiple languages, and then inevitably burning out regularly. What has been made glaringly clear at this juncture in history is the role the library as an institution has played in reinforcing and sustaining systemic racism and racist policies.

As such, this means that every library, when looking to introduce and enact strategic initiatives towards DEIA work or becoming an anti-racist organization must first look internally, to their own staff of Color for leadership and expertise. Paraphrasing Ibram X. Kendi, from his seminal book “How to be an Anti-Racist”, anti-racism is not an identity that can be claimed and then walked away from, it is a continuous action. An institution cannot put out a press release claiming to be anti-racist. It must be active with a list of programs, a collection of artifacts, community presence and stakeholders in order to legitimately substantiate the claim that what they are doing is contributing to making society more equitable for the people historically excluded from the opportunities available to a white person.

Library leaders must make sure that BIPOC staff are not relegated to permission structures where a seat at a table is offered without voice. BIPOC staff are skilled in practices white populations never needed to learn. They must learn to navigate microaggressions, code switch, and smile when they are asked to speak for every person in their racial group. They must learn to work subversively in a profession that seeks to help people elevate their own state of consciousness, because they themselves have had that experience and see what changes can happen with the right, (or white), words.

Indeed, sometimes a BIPOC can be dismissed if they speak from experience, especially if that person is at the intersection of other marginalized identities. It implies that they are too close to the subject to offer any sort of objective analysis.

The framework described here is the result of 15 years of public library reference and service work. Its importance relative to the author shouldn’t preclude it from being treated as authoritative, but that is precisely what happens in DEIA work. Librarians of Color are required to completely separate or disembody from lived experiences to be taken seriously, or to be consulted with by administration or academia. Even though it is that same firsthand experience that validates the success of the work being proposed.

Practitioners and academics must work collaboratively on transforming the profession of librarianship. This is vital for both groups. Academics have approached the public library with ideas that can in themselves unknowingly manifest as a continuation of racist practices. This is also because a true partnership between the two means planning for a sustainable mode of practice once the grant fund expires.

The title of this paper is Meaningful Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Accessibility in a Large Urban Library. If the library is to survive to the next millennium, it is important we evolve, and account for our explicit racist actions of the past. By not starting this work internally, we continue to drive BIPOC leaders out of the profession, inevitably leading to a society with divides so wide that they can never be overcome. We must help move our society towards liberation and that means including and designing for historically excluded groups that were and continue to be purposely silenced due to white supremacy and systemic racism. Efforts moving towards liberation will lead to a knowledge based society where everyone can peacefully coexist.

This framework is divided into three areas of focus: Librarians, Outreach and Responsive Evaluation. Individually, they are already practiced at our public library, but what is being proposed is that collectively they form a foundation for a powerful and effective plan that is inspirational and iterative.

**Librarians**

The mission of librarians is to improve society through facilitating knowledge creation in communities. - R. David Lankes[[1]](#footnote-1)

When it was published in 2011, the book “Atlas of New Librarianship” resonated widely with public librarians. This is because they found within it an accessible theoretical framework for public reference work in particular. It articulated the neighborhood librarian’s role in developing societal consciousness through everyday interactions and responsibilities.

21 years into the 21st century, we remain at risk of continuing to navigate the digital age without a clear plan, and as a result, has left us in an infodemic[[2]](#footnote-2). Misinformation and disinformation were granted channels through social media with no comparable alternative to stifle its rapid dissemination. It is clear that the library as an institution does not have the same influence in society as it once did, although the librarian still exercises a degree of influence and trust. It is now more than ever that librarians, and library support staff, come together and devise new ideas to effectively disseminate accurate information.

Librarianship as a profession is at a reckoning. The battle between intellectual freedom and DEIA work had drawn lines on the ground even at the institution’s largest professional organization, American Library Association.

As a result, librarians of Color have taken an offensive approach by joining librarianship to interdisciplinary studies that elucidate practices and policies that critically examine long standing knowledge information systems.

Critical Librarianship

Critical Race Theory (CRT) stems from Critical Legal Studies in the 1960s. Kimberleé Crenshaw, one of most influential and educated legal scholars in the field describes it as “an approach to grappling with a history of white supremacy that rejects the belief that what’s in the past is in the past, and that laws and systems that grow from the past are detached from it.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Tenets of CRT include recognizing that racism is normal, white supremacy is built into the systems at the foundation of American society, and liberalism is a salve for steering populations away from critically examining their station in life. Understanding that the librarian serves as facilitators in knowledge creation, Critical Librarianship is necessary for moving forward in contending with an inequitable society.

An excellent introduction to Critical Librarianship is provided in the book Knowledge Justice: Disrupting Library and Information Studies through Critical Race Theory, edited by Sofia Y. Leung and Jorge R. Lopez-McKnight.[[4]](#footnote-4) Critical Librarianship, like CRT is complex, but the book’s thoughtfully curated articles from active BIPOC, disabled, and LGBTQIA+ information professionals in areas of librarianship, academic, public and schools, archivists and activists permits for both a beneficial and at the same time nuanced overview of the subject.

A common theme in these articles is an examination of the experiences of librarians of Color. In a field where 88% of librarians are still white[[5]](#footnote-5), what happens more often than not is the burden of steering a DEIA project somehow still manages to be placed in the hands of BIPOC staff. Those staff members usually are not being granted administrative authority to impact any significant change which suggests that “empowering” BIPOC staff this way, staff with the least amount of agency, to lead the way through DEIA strategies is already likely to not be successful.

The suggestion put forth here is that by introducing staff to a flexible framework that they can inform, a combination of New Librarianship, Critical Librarianship and Design Thinking (see below) strategies can be developed that align with the institution's organizational missions thereby turning them into real progress.

Chicago Public Library has 10 Cultural committees that are tasked with curating programming for the national heritage months. Over the course of 30 years since they have existed we find that staff of Color gravitate to these groups mostly by word of mouth from fellow staff, even though that work is voluntary and requires them to still perform their daily duties. The staff who serve on these committees do so in part because they are aware of the gaps in their work serving communities in need.

They have first hand experience of the barriers that appeared in their own journeys in professionalism, and the “white norms” they have had to adapt to to be heard. Their story is a part of the history of Chicago, they are members of their communities, and they want to dismantle any hurdles for people by providing them with meaningful information. By centering and elevating the voices of BIPOC librarians, the library as an institution will evolve to be the egalitarian place in society it claims to be.

Reparative Collection Development, Archiving, Cataloging

“American archivists' neglect in documenting violence against a marginalized group has real and lasting implications for restorative and transitional justice.”[[6]](#footnote-6) - Tonia Sutherland

There are very real world ramifications from the lack of written documentation when attempting to demonstrate a pattern in inequity. History privileges the written word. As a result, recorded history is presented from the side of the victors who owned the means of dissemination; newspapers magnates, publishers, the Library of Congress.

Currently, the bias in Library of Congress subject headings is being brought to light by critical catalogers,[[7]](#footnote-7) but contending with 250 years of white supremacy will take time, effort and empathy from staff at cultural institutions who are tasked with presenting and making information accessible for all. However, compromising consistency is an argument those on the opposing side of reparative practices adopt; if it changes at the Library of Congress level, how will that work with larger societal institutions and laws that still reflect dated terminology?[[8]](#footnote-8) Information institutions run the risk of severing discovery if they alter the language used, regardless if the change in language can be deemed “more inclusive.”

But language changes all the time, what is lacking is the interest convergence (see below). BIPOC people are versed in different languages, dialects and means of expression to adapt to their environments and that reflect their cultural experiences. Code switching is necessary for navigating professional circles. Spanglish is a Latinx millennials’ way of speaking, an act of defiance against assimilation but acknowledgement of the melting pot of the United States.

Reparation is about making amends for a wronged one. BIPOC are all wronged, and continue to be wronged. Erasure of their history is a very explicit action that continues to thrive in cultural institutions around the world. What is needed is to bring a critical lens to what information is kept by archiving, what is “worthy” of archiving, and how it is made accessible in collections. It must be named accurately and responsibly so that everyone, including the people missing from it, can access it.

Accessible Practices

The COVID pandemic triggered a virtual programming revolution in libraries.[[9]](#footnote-9) Libraries all across the country went searching for their YouTube passwords. What has resulted from all those new virtual outlets is connections with a completely new audience that had never been considered: one that is incapable of attending an in person program. Disabled persons who have been excluded because of loopholes in compliance for spaces, neurodivergent people who for many reasons find public gatherings inaccessible to them, and deaf people who hesitate with asking for accommodation so as not to be labeled “difficult.”

There are many reasons that virtual programming should continue to be prioritized in our spaces post-pandemic. However, there are concerns that it is already being thought of as inessential and it is because post-pandemic, the “Interest Convergence” (see below) is no longer activated.

Interest convergence is a tenet of Critical Race Theory that dictates that monumental change will only happen if it benefits white populations. Coined by Professor Derrick Bell[[10]](#footnote-10), it is the notion that the majority will only support the interests of the minority if, and only if, they align. As people start to return to in person experiences, the people who finally felt part of a community that hadn’t existed before will be left behind. As Disability Justice advocates recognize, it is society’s deliberate inaction in providing accessibility that makes them less able to participate to their full potential. When racism and ableism intersect, it presents a distinct set of challenges for that individual, locked out of even more opportunities.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Public libraries are community information centers. We must remember and emphasize that the community includes everyone. Improving society through knowledge creation is not limited to in-person interactions, they can and indeed have been happening at a distance, and libraries need to sustain those virtual channels and evolve them to better serve this new audience.

Counter-Storytelling

Storytelling in public libraries is one of the first courses taken in library school for those studying children’s librarianship. “The popularity of this traditional form is indicative not only of the human need to connect, but the human need for story.”[[12]](#footnote-12) There is an abundance of research already done in the effectiveness of its use in pedagogy, but our library has long practiced this in events that are curated again, by our Cultural committees.

“The counter-story is also a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the dominant white stories of racial privilege.[[13]](#footnote-13) When libraries curate programs that center historically excluded groups as authority, presenter, narrator, historian, they are filling in a gap in history by presenting a counter narrative.

A popular program for children at multiple Chicago Public Libraries, is Drag Queen Story time[[14]](#footnote-14). Introducing children to models of gender fluidity is incredibly important as such formative times of their lives. Celebrations of Juneteenth[[15]](#footnote-15), learning Ikebana[[16]](#footnote-16), and community poetry collectives[[17]](#footnote-17) are other examples of programs that have appealed to all, but are designed with a particular community in mind. Design Thinking, which will be introduced further on, does offer a process for really exploring the needs of particular intersectionalities that inevitably lead to more creative events that introduce everyone to new ways of thinking.

As described above, libraries also have a responsibility for engaging with virtual communities. Much discourse regarding social and racial justice is coming from younger people who have found each other through online communities. There is a generational divide that is growing when discussing injustices, with younger people being forced to navigate a system they now understand was designed to exclude them. Long standing cultural institutions that have physical spaces and political influence are predominantly funded by private funds, and led by older generations who remain oblivious to such injustices. Lacking the wealth to secure a physical location, they must be sought out by libraries to remind them they have a place to gather, to learn and connect. They present authority in history that is happening now and are choosing to be active in the movement. Libraries should do everything they can to make sure those stories will not be lost to history.

**Outreach**

*Building and holding the trust in the community is the scaffolding in which all facilitation is built. -* R. David Lankes - Atlas of New Librarianship

A community exists in many forms, many of which are intersectional. They can represent a group of people with a common interest. They can represent a group of people who live on the same block. They can also represent a group of people the same age. When it comes to practices that advance the ideals behind DEIA, what is really needed is to understand that the needs of marginalized communities must be prioritized and connecting with them means getting out of the library into an environment where they are most comfortable.

Outreach is about serving communities outside the library. However, the library cannot hope that strong ties will simply manifest with a population that are used to being ignored by institutions. A plan for outreach is essential for a library that aims to work with and serve communities that have been long deprived of help and resources. Staff at the neighborhood library must view themselves as part of the community if they hope to effect a symbiotic relationship. That starts with being present in the community to forge relationships.

Community as Expert

Chicago remains a segregated city, to the point where a nickname for the city is “City of Neighborhoods”. It reinforces that it is a collective of neighborhoods, many of a particular racial makeup, where policies rooted in white supremacy such as redlining have prevented full integration.[[18]](#footnote-18)

With that said, the wealth of cultural knowledge in each of these neighborhoods cannot be discounted; it contributed directly to their survival today. There is a long history of harmful ethnographic research conducted in these neighborhoods that have treated communities as temporary sites of inquiry with no restorative plans to rectify the inequities discovered.

Serving as a public librarian in a community requires a commitment to improving it. This work also gives opportunity for librarians to identify and validate the shared cultural knowledge in which the community is versed. It means talking to and knowing the name of the grandma matriarch of the block who, from her stoop, has watched over the area for more than 30 years. It also provides an opportunity to intercept people who are only a small piece of information away from opening a new door. This can be a hopeful small business owner who only speaks Spanish, or a teen who has been accepted but has no starting point for searching how to pay for college.

Libraries can also invite community experts back into the library, further validating the importance of their histories in our spaces.[[19]](#footnote-19) An important element of outreach is about sustaining that connection beyond initial interactions. The library is a welcoming place for everyone, but we must invite people who are inclined to not ask, as society has deemed them and their stories as unimportant and not worth documenting. This is counter-storytelling that also centers the voice of the expert.

Events to Experiences

Libraries specialize in providing events for our communities. With DEIA work, building these community connections is about maintaining that connection after the event has concluded, which is not how events are typically designed. Concerts are a performance as is an author event. Considering what happens after the event to maintain a continuous stream of service is what distinguishes the event from an experience.

Designing experiences involves a vital planning stage. One model that has worked well especially when designing for outreach interactions is using what is known as a “Service Journey” model. The Service Journey includes understanding a user's behaviors from beginning to end. It allows us to review what happens at each stage of participation, and the behaviors we hope to inspire throughout interaction.

Service Journey

An example: a user must first learn about the outreach event. How does that happen? In a community, word of mouth is a bond. Trust is in people, not in institutions.

When participants approach the library booth at a street festival, what does their first interaction look like? Usually it involves asking about getting a library card or something to do with books. It's a transactional yes or no response, nothing interesting or memorable.

Instead, think about how they should feel as soon as they enter and design a way for them to engage. Have an activity that is meaningful to them. Games are a great tool for this, because it requires a commitment to learning something new for a fun purpose.

Chicago Public Library has been engaging with adults of all backgrounds by challenging them to a simple game through outreach events since 2015. The engagement is designed to be non-invasive and unrevealing. There shouldn’t be a caveat to the experience that only by making yourself vulnerable can you participate. Many times the interactions never even involved asking a name, unless it was volunteered by the person.

Exiting from the experience must be made easy. They are not indebted to the library like a for profit entity, they determine their own level of involvement. Libraries should design for extending the experience by channeling that participation into another information interaction; a notice of a similar event going on elsewhere, or related reading materials, or an email exchange.

Experiences are longer interactions, which gives more time to listen. They require more planning, but after many years of outreach events targeting adult gamers of Chicago, we find a growing community of people of all backgrounds attending these game-related library events regularly.

Remember that this community needs a break too. Not all experiences or events have to deal with past trauma, in fact, some that may seem innocuous can be incredibly invasive and close up future communication channels. An example of a fun and important “counter-narrative” event is exploring intersectionality through Nerds of Color. Fandoms especially are about bringing people together to share and exhibit their joy. They have carved out their spaces at conventions, online, and lately in Hollywood that present a source of pride for their community. Celebrating victories is a joyful experience for everyone and inspires more to come.

**Responsive Evaluation**

Design Thinking

In 2014 the Gates Foundation funded a grant that led to the creation of the “Design Thinking in Libraries Toolkit” in collaboration with the design firm IDEO, Aarhus Public Libraries and Chicago Public Library. The toolkit is still used to guide projects at both libraries while teams from Aarhus and Chicago continue to host seminars with librarians and other information professionals on how to apply it to their work.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Design Thinking is a creative intentional problem-solving process that puts the user at the center. It is about analyzing and meeting the emotional needs of a person. It has three areas of focus: Inspiration, which is conducting primary research using familiar methods, Ideation, where group downloading, documenting, group analysis and brainstorming occur, and Iteration, prototyping, feedback and review.

One great advantage of using the design thinking process is how important empathy is needed for the process to work. It starts with conducting in-depth interviews with extreme users as they are best able to recognize and articulate problems unseen by users with marginal interactions. When identifying community expertise as discussed above, these are the members of the community who offer the most insight into its needs. It is an opportunity to discover new community information firsthand.

Through the process of iteration, feedback and review, Design Thinking is a process that constantly circles back on itself to improve reception by the intended audience. None of the newly collected information is ever discarded. It becomes more valuable because in addition to informing prototypes and potential solutions for a problem, it can also be presented to the community to explain the thought process of librarians involved in the research.

It serves to meet a secondary goal of documenting stories. It forces practitioners to reflect and correct their assumptions through the prototype process. It is flexible enough that solutions can quickly be revised if the first idea does not work as intended.

Most importantly, it is a collaborative process with the community. There are no insights, no research, without community support and involvement. Inspiration involves getting out and being inspired to address a perceived problem. It is through interviews that the problem can be better understood and in turn revised. There is always room for another idea to pursue, another person to talk to, and a different group from which to seek out feedback.

Having staff in a position of inquiry is very new for public librarianship. Mostly it is about maintaining services as they have always been with some exceptions. But, when we see that those services are not reaching the people who need it most, that the same patrons with issues are still coming into the libraries years later with those same issues, it is time to revise our approach. If we’re trying to improve society, Design Thinking offers a very clear process that has our staff in a constant state of inquiry, which leads to lasting solutions and a level of empathy BIPOC communities deserve.

Quantitative Data Alone Isn’t Enough

At no time can an organization say “we are 5% less racist this year.” When measuring the success of DEIA work, focusing on static numbers alone means sacrificing meaning.

Having a program with only 5 attendees does not seem very successful. But when one of those attendees was connected with resources in Spanish about help with a domestic violence situation, how do you measure, using numbers, the impact of that interaction?

“*How can we start to model a form of literary criticism that attends both to the qualitative and quantitative aspects of racial oppression?”* Richard Jean So[[21]](#footnote-21)

In his excellent book, Redlining Culture: A Data History of Racial Inequality and Postwar Fiction, Richard Jean So presents an exhaustive machine learning analysis of 50 years of publishing from Random House. Juxtaposed with prolific author Toni Morrison’s tenure as editor at the publisher, the proclamation by publishers that they have responded to reflect more of a diversified society by publishing more BIPOC authors is proven false. His motivation behind writing the book is understanding again why society remains so inequitable for BIPOC authors in particular. By analyzing not just one year, but taking instead a 50 year review of data, nuances can be identified to coincide with other known events or beliefs in the same time span.

Quantitative data must intersect with qualitative to prescribe meaning. If forced to only select one, in DEIA work, qualitatively must be prioritized. If a library performed a collection audit that sought to identify how many books on their shelves were written by BIPOC authors in the end, it's just a number with no new understanding. If a library additionally also takes a look at selection guidelines that have not changed for 40 years and observes that all staff making purchases are white librarians, then with this new information comes understanding. This is a very simplified example of how much more meaning and in turn action can be taken if the stories behind the numbers intersect with the numbers themselves.

When qualitative data is given precedence, how does an institution measure success? By observing a change in behavioral patterns. It happens when communities respond by leaning further into their role as stakeholders at the library. It happens when our librarians are recognized as an integral part of the communities they serve. It happens when administration is supportive of actions that specifically cater to an underserved and marginalized population even when that means only one or two people at a time. It is when staff of Color feel valued for their expertise by being asked for their thoughts instead of their compliance.

**Closing**

*The contradiction between economic and technological overdevelopment and political and human underdevelopment.* - Grace Lee Boggs [[22]](#footnote-22)

Grace Lee Boggs was a Chinese American author, social activist, philosopher and feminist. The above quote is an observation of society in the mid-19th century and how investment in people is secondary to capitalism. In 2021, these same economic and digital divides grow starker and continue to be ignored by those in power. She is an example of how co-existing identities can persevere and be powerful in a society if we come together with others seeking social, racial, economic justice.

There is hope in the library. We are not only providing information, we are curating information that helps all people thrive. We are connecting people with stories, and we must now center the people who have been silenced.

The change in libraries will be led by librarians. It involves leaning into our role as powerful imperfect beings who value information and want to make sure that in providing it, they are contributing to a more equitable society. That means evaluating our history, providing interdisciplinary and modular frameworks, and empowering the many BIPOC information professionals with authority to affect change. All of society will benefit.

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