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### Abstract

For collaborative leadership, the Joint Conference of Librarians of Color (JCLC) provides an excellent model of shared, collective leadership that advances both the profession and practitioners of librarianship. This paper describes how JCLC was founded to deal with issues of racial inequality in librarianship and how it exemplifies collaborative leadership from the perspectives of servant, adaptive, transforming and collective leadership.

### Keywords

collaborative leadership, library associations, library conferences, professional development, communities of color

*Peer Reviewed Article*

## Case Study in Collaborative Leadership: Joint Conference of Librarians of Color

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### Abstract

For collaborative leadership, the Joint Conference of Librarians of Color (JCLC) provides an excellent model of shared, collective leadership that advances both the profession and practitioners of librarianship. This paper describes how JCLC was founded to deal with issues of racial inequality in librarianship and how it exemplifies collaborative leadership from the perspectives of servant, adaptive, transforming and collective leadership.

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When considering shared, collaborative leadership in our profession, the idea of library conferences come to mind as one of the best examples. In my nearly two decades in academia, I have found conferences for the professional development of library workers somewhat unusual compared to other conferences I have attended, such as those focused on disciplinary work in political science, on online education, or higher education generally. The main difference from my perspective is that library conferences tend to be organized and run mostly or completely by volunteers who are professionals in the library field, spanning all the various permutations of library from primary school to academic to public to other, who may or may not get some sort of career-related boost out of their work. These uncompensated conference leaders put to-

gether a slate of professional development activities by and for their peers, and then spend the time at conference serving the needs of these peer-presenters and learning from them. The leadership for the next conference is then recruited from the presenters of past conferences.

One of the more interesting and relevant examples, for the purposes of looking at collaborative leadership in terms of furthering social justice in librarianship, is the founding of the Joint Conference of Librarians of Color. Known as JCLC, this conference is a collaborative professional development event organized by the ethnic affiliates of the American Library Association. Considered by participants, organizers, and the American Library Association to be an influential and supportive professional development experience for persons of color, this article will



look at the establishment of JCLC. It will then analyze how, both in the instance of that conference and how in conferences in librarianship generally, leadership roles merge, swap, and can be collaboratively constructed. Finally, JCLC will be examined using the frameworks of servant, adaptive, transforming and collective leadership in meeting its stated goals within the profession of librarianship. Placing JCLC in context among these frameworks draws out the elements of collaborative, values-centered leadership that make it a successful and empowering professional development experience in librarianship.

### Establishment of JCLC

The first Joint Conference of Librarians of Color was held in Dallas from October 12-15, 2006. However, the idea was eight years in the making, according to conference co-chair Gladys Smiley Bell.<sup>1</sup> The five ethnic caucuses and associations of the American Library Association (ALA)--the American Indian Library Association (AILA), the Asian/Pacific American Library Association (APALA), the Black Caucus of the American Library Association (BCALA), the Chinese American Librarians Association (CALA), and the National Association to Promote Library & Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish-speaking (REFORMA)--worked together over that time to organize, plan, and carry out the conference.

Some of these ethnic caucuses and associations provide existing formal meetings and conferences for their members. One of the more well-known of these is the Culture Keepers/National Conference of African American Librarians conference of BCALA. First held in Columbus, Ohio in 1992, the conference has been held every few years since. It traces its lineage back to the 1927 Negro Library Conference, which focused on education of Black librarians in the United States.<sup>2</sup> BCALA itself was founded in 1970 to address concerns that ALA did not serve the needs

of Black librarians. In 1992 it became part of the American Library Association.<sup>3</sup>

AILA was founded in 1979 as part of the White House Pre-Conference on Indian Library and Information Services on or Near Reservations. Up until this time not much attention had been paid to library resources for reservation residents and resources were generally inadequate.<sup>4</sup> AILA members primarily meet at ALA events, although AILA is also active in the biennial International Indigenous Librarians' Forum that was founded in 1999 in New Zealand.<sup>5</sup>

APALA grew out of the Asian American Librarians Caucus that formed in 1975 to "support and encourage library services to the Asian American community."<sup>6</sup> It was based on BCALA and REFORMA, established a few years beforehand, and had ties to the Asian-American movement of the late 1960s.<sup>7</sup> In 1977 it incorporated in the state of Illinois and became the Asian American Library Association.<sup>8</sup> AALA offered programming at the annual American Library Association conference until it fell apart in the late 1970s and re-emerged as APALA in 1980<sup>9</sup>, which then continued the tradition of offering continuing education, cultural events and visibility to Asians and Asian Americans at the American Library Association annual conferences. APALA and CALA offered a joint National Conference of Asian American Librarians in 2001, which was considered to be "a precursor to the collaborative concept of the JCLCs."<sup>10</sup>

CALA started out in 1973 as the Mid-West Chinese American Librarians Association, in Illinois. A year later, the Chinese Librarians Association was formed in California. In 1976 the Mid-West Chinese Librarians Association expanded to cover the nation, and by 1979, CALA had done the same. The two merged in 1983 and in 1988 established ties with library associations in China.<sup>11</sup> Like APALA and AILA, CALA mostly offers continuing education, cultural events, and

visibility to Chinese librarians, authors, and issues at the annual conference of the American Library Association.

REFORMA was established in 1971 as an affiliate of the American Library Association, and is “committed to the improvement of the full spectrum of library and information services for Spanish-speaking and Latino people in the United States.”<sup>12</sup> There are twenty autonomous chapters of REFORMA in the United States. Eleven REFORMA National Conferences have been held; the first one was in 1996 and the most recent was scheduled to be held in 2019 in Puerto Rico but has been postponed indefinitely.

The founding of JCLC by these caucuses is an example of “how the library profession has addressed diversity initiatives using *librarians of color* to identify librarians from underrepresented groups”<sup>13</sup> [italics in original] in order to “provide librarians with a sense of support and community.”<sup>14</sup> In a profession that is 86% white<sup>15</sup>, this sense of belonging in librarianship is hard to come by for persons of color. The caucuses and ethnic groups worked collaboratively, on a volunteer basis, to put together the first JCLC and all others following. No one caucus took the lead, and any money made by the conference through registration fees was divided equally among the five after conference costs like meeting space rental were paid.

### Conferences as Collaborative Leadership

Professional conferences have not been studied widely as an exemplar of leadership in general—I could only find descriptive articles looking at conferences focused on leadership topics when searching on Google Scholar—but naturally these conferences offer many examples of leadership from many levels and perspectives. For this article, I focus on JCLC, and library conferences generally, as examples of collaborative leadership in the way that their programs and events are designed and offered, particularly in

how those programming decisions are made and by whom. Of particular interest with JCLC is its strong adherence to stated goals and themes and its reliance on unpaid volunteers.

The first JCLC had over 1,100 attendees and was themed “Gathering at the Waters: Embracing our Spirits, Telling our Stories.” The stated goal of the conference was to “discuss diversity issues that impact America’s libraries and their users.”<sup>16</sup> The conference steering committee was made up of 2-3 volunteers from each caucus or ethnic group affiliate, with one ALA staff member.<sup>17</sup> The conference program list, available online at <http://www.ala.org/aboutala/sites/ala.org/aboutala/files/content/diversity/jclc/2006/JCLCprogramlist.pdf>, shows that the sessions presented then covered issues typical to conferences in librarianship ranging from collection development and user services to fundraising and technology, but also focused heavily on career development, mentoring, recruitment and retention, and self-care. Unfortunately, the presenters’ names are not preserved on this document, but the presenters were volunteers who submitted proposals that were reviewed and selected by a volunteer committee.

The second offering of JCLC, held in 2012, operated identically to the first, although it took only 6 years to develop rather than 8. The theme was also very similar: “Gathering at the Waters: Celebrating Stories, Embracing Communities.” The stated goal of the conference was: “JCLC brings together a diverse group of librarians, library staff, library supporters, and community participants to explore issues of diversity in libraries and how they affect the ethnic communities who use our services.”<sup>18</sup> Attendance was slightly lower, at a little over 800, and was considered a ‘welcoming’ and ‘motivating’ experience by attendees.<sup>19</sup> A fuller program list is available online for this conference and indicates a similar blend of sessions as the first conference, separated into five official tracks: Advocacy, Outreach, and Collaboration; Collections, Programs,



and Services; Deep Diversity and Cultural Exchange; Leadership, Management, and Organizational Development; and Technology and Innovation.<sup>20</sup> The steering committee was more formalized for this offering, consisting of 2 representatives from each caucus, totaling 10 members, with each steering committee member serving as a chair for a separate planning committee.<sup>21</sup>

Following the 2012 conference, The Joint Council of Librarians of Color (JCLC, Inc.) formed in June, 2015 as a nonprofit organization that advocates for and addresses the common needs of the American Library Association ethnic affiliates. The organization's mission statement is: "To promote librarianship within communities of color, support literacy and the preservation of history and cultural heritage, collaborate on common issues, and to host the Joint Conference of Librarians of Color every four to five years."<sup>22</sup> The board of JCLC, Inc. consists of one representative from each ethnic affiliate.

The most recent offering of JCLC occurred in September, 2018. Again, the main organizing elements remained mostly the same as from the second offering. The conference theme was "Gathering all Peoples: Embracing Culture and Community," with the conference goal stated as: "open to all library staff, students, influencers, and decision-makers interested in exploring inclusive policies, practices, and issue of diversity in libraries and how they affect the ethnic communities who use our services."<sup>23</sup> The steering committee and other committee work setup remained the same, and the program, available on the conference website, had a similar mix of sessions tracked into the following topic areas: Advocacy, Outreach and Collaboration; Bridge Building, Intersectionality, and Inclusion; Collections, Programs and Services; Leadership, Management, and Organizational Development; and Technology and Innovation. The conference had over 1000 attendees, and it was announced at its conclusion that due to its success it will

now be held at least every four years, with the next date and location to be announced by the end of January 2019.<sup>24</sup>

### **JCLC examined within various leadership frameworks**

Looking at JCLC as an example of leadership as a professional development opportunity created, organized, and presented by volunteers, for a profession with a strong service component, with an ethos of creating a rejuvenating place for persons of color in a very white profession, naturally fosters an atmosphere of servant leadership. Servant leadership is the concept that leaders ought to 'serve' followers by helping them overcome barriers, smooth their paths, and lift up and provide support. Servant leadership has been studied in librarianship generally, but usually from a managerial perspective within individual libraries<sup>25</sup> or from a Christian perspective.<sup>26</sup> However, the atmosphere at JCLC allowed attendees to integrate the concepts of servant leadership, that leaders ought to support and provide for followers, within this professional development context. As stated by an attendee of the first two JCLCs: "I believe this awareness helped to shift the dynamic and atmosphere of the conference because it allowed many of us to focus on our role as librarian servant/service leaders. This helped us to realize that it is our duty to learn and to engage with our peers so that we could return to our communities recharged and repurposed."<sup>27</sup> The professional ethic of service in librarianship along with the desire to best serve other library workers of color describes well those who brought together the profession's ethnic caucuses to create the JCLC. These are people who are servants first, as Greenleaf would say, but had the foresight to see what was needed to best support and lead persons of color within the profession. As he put it, "from one level of consciousness, each of us acts resolutely from moment to moment on a set of assumptions that then govern one's life.



Simultaneously, from another level, the adequacy of these assumptions is examined, in action, with the aim of future revision and improvement."<sup>28</sup> This foresight allowed those involved within librarianship to see a path forward and lead others to create and repeat the JCLC to benefit their peers and the profession.

There is also a strong sense of community within JCLC as can be seen through the history described above. This sense of community is central to a servant leadership approach, as is the sense that if the needed or right community doesn't exist, individuals take initiative to create one. That is exactly what the caucuses did in their initial formation of the Joint Conference planning group, and then with the launching of JCLC they created a larger, more collaborative and interconnected community for persons of color within librarianship. The founding of JCLC, Inc., between the second and third JCLC can be said to have established official trustees for the community, which "provides a great opportunity for those who would serve and lead"<sup>29</sup> and has helped create a stronger institution by building community.

A somewhat deeper analysis is required to see how JCLC illustrates adaptive leadership, which is less studied overall in librarianship.<sup>30</sup> Adaptive leadership is values-centered and involves leading in such a way that followers develop capacity to solve problems from that value perspective. Adaptive leadership offers several concrete principles and concepts designed to help leaders conceptualize change, maintain perspective and take risks as they function within organizations or groups, some of which are illustrated below.

The first approach would be to consider the problem the establishment of JCLC was intended to solve--creating a welcoming space for library workers of color in a profession that is predominantly white. This could clearly be seen by adaptive leaders as a technical problem, with

the technical solution of creating a conference that is set aside for persons of color. However, where the adaptive leadership comes in is in the collaboration across ethnic and color lines, including white people, transforming this technical problem into an adaptive problem with an adaptive, values-centered, change-oriented solution. By this, I mean using that collaboration to build on the values held dear by the ethnic caucuses and using their joint work in "...developing the organizational and cultural capacity to meet problems successfully according to our values and purposes."<sup>31</sup> This approach also builds upon the servant leadership ethos present in librarianship and in the design and offering of conferences within librarianship. The way that the JCLC worked to create a hierarchical structure of authority also helped them accomplish their goals through adaptive leadership, by tying in the ability to resolve those technical problems a conference presents and build on experience and past successes<sup>32</sup>, but also creating a framework for trust through predictability along the dimensions of values and skills, which builds their authority in librarianship as leaders and change agents.<sup>33</sup>

A side note to the discussion of cross-ethnic collaborations creating solutions according to values and purposes: JCLC has constructed itself to be wholly inclusive of white library workers as well as those of color, and has in practice been embraced by the LGBTQ+ community within librarianship as well as those with physical disabilities. However, during my attendance in September 2018, I faced critique by (mostly white) colleagues for attending JCLC as a white person and taking up space at a conference meant for persons of color. This was resonant with me when I read Fanny Lou Hamer's biography by Chana Kai Lee, where the role of white involvement in the U.S. Civil Rights Movement through the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was discussed in light of the Black

separatist factions rising up in 1966. I appreciated how “Hamer maintained that white participation in a movement for social justice was not at odds with the intentions and achievement of black self-determination,”<sup>34</sup> that is, that white people can participate in activities created by and for empowering people of color. On the other hand, I could also see myself, and the position of other ‘nice white ladies’ attending JCLC (as I was not the only one) as similar to Hamer’s work with the National Women’s Political Caucus (NWPC) in 1971, where working across color lines with this group of white liberal feminists, alongside other Black activists like Shirley Chisholm, was instrumental in obtaining the NWPC’s first official action, the passing an anti-racism resolution.<sup>35</sup> Collaborating with white people on issues of race will always be a fraught situation for persons of color, but an adaptive approach focused on developing capacity and centered on shared values and purposes, like JCLC, SNCC, and NWPC, has a lot to offer as a way to collaborate productively and keep the needs of persons of color central to the work.

JCLC illustrates the five strategic principles of adaptive leadership: Identifying the adaptive challenge (as discussed above), keeping the level of distress around risk and change manageable, focusing attention on issues rather than distractions (the concept of technical versus adaptive challenges), giving the work back to the people at a manageable rate, and protecting voices of leadership without authority.<sup>36</sup> JCLC keeps the level of distress manageable and gives work back to the people through the mechanism of offering a traditional professional development conference as its main method of creating a welcoming space for persons of color within librarianship. This mechanism helps those involved in putting on the conferences focus on the issues at the heart of JCLC rather than technicalities, as long as they don’t get distracted by technical problems inherent with running a confer-

ence. While important details that need to be attended to in order to offer a quality conference, it can be tempting to devote the bulk of our attention to the little things that are easily addressed rather than focusing on and thinking deeply about harder-to-quantify issues. I could see volunteers easily getting bogged down in “work avoidance mechanisms”<sup>37</sup> of balancing various offerings of presentations or fussing over meeting room setup choices rather than addressing the values and goals of the conference, but JCLC’s rotating and collaborative leadership serves to help keep energy, focus and motivation on the higher-level goals of the conference. The rotating and collaborative leadership structure also helps give work back to the people at a manageable rate since no one person, or small group of insiders, carries the burden of leadership. There’s a cyclically-changing group, drawn from five other groups, maintaining a strong focus on the ultimate vision of JCLC and passing the work amongst themselves and down the line to other volunteers. The structure also protects those in leadership without authority in JCLC, by the very nature of the conference environment where they can present papers or workshops or be vocal attendees of workshops and sessions.

The final way in which JCLC serves to model adaptive leadership is by its use of the professional development conference to offer a holding environment for those in the library profession who want to work with race. A holding environment in adaptive leadership is a sort of ‘safe space’ where values can be tested and leadership explored. Viewing the conference as a holding environment means that the conference offers a productive zone of disequilibrium: there is some distress in putting together a large professional development activity involving five groups focused around issues of race, but there is a strong structure, motivated leadership, and clear, values-based goals to balance that dis-



tress. Through the activity of putting on a conference there are plenty of outlets and levels of involvement, as well as ways for people to lead with or without authority. The conference has a built-in audience in the five caucuses, providing a lot of safety for the final product--it will likely be successful no matter what happens--but there is also a lot of appreciation for experimentation and trying new things in order to attract attendees beyond the caucuses. A professional development conference as a holding environment also provides a way to lower the temperature around contentious issues of race in a majority-white profession by making race less of an individual and more of a professional issue, and by putting some (but not all—in an effort to combat work avoidance) of the energy around the issue on the technical problems of running a conference.

In contrast, using Burns's Transforming Leadership as a frame to analyze JCLC can show us how this collaborative development within librarianship adds an elevating element to the basic idea of the professional conference. A major approach for library leadership professional development and "the single most studied and debated idea within the field of leadership,"<sup>38</sup> many library workers who have undergone some professional development centered around leadership have been exposed to Burns's work. The focus in this approach is on proactive individual transformation and empowerment, both on the part of the leader but in the leader's work with followers.

Several of the individual experiences and points of view cited above throughout the development of JCLC demonstrate that one of the goals of the conference is to provide a place of empowerment for persons of color in a predominantly white profession. The JCLC leaders can truly be said to "take the initiative in mobilizing people for participation in the processes of change, encouraging a sense of collective identity and collective efficacy, which in turn brings

stronger feelings of self-worth and self-efficacy...By pursuing transforming change, people can empower themselves."<sup>39</sup> The ultimate desired outcome of JCLC is to transform the library profession, to make it more welcoming and open to and for persons of color. There is a strong encouragement around the collective identities of persons of color both from their individual ethnic group but also as a whole, which allows for dynamic, collaborative and shifting leadership and followership during the course of the conference cycle.

Another element of Burns's Transforming Leadership is apparent through JCLC's addressing of leadership as a way to serve followers' desire for collaborative professional development across color lines. In Burns's view, leaders "take the initiative in making the leader-led connection" while "addressing themselves to followers' wants, needs and other motivations, as well as to their own, and thus they serve as an *independent force in changing the makeup of the followers' motive base through gratifying their motives.*"<sup>40</sup> The leaders of the conferences, in carrying out this professional development exercise, exercise their independence by putting together a conference that meets followers' motives but also builds towards a followership that believes in the power of collaboration around professional development as a way to empower persons of color within the library profession. They amplify, restore and create motivation around their ultimate goal and build up future leaders to take their place in the next iteration of the conference.

To take a look at JCLC through the lens of collective leadership, we can use Petra Kuenkel's Collective Leadership Compass, or CLC.<sup>41</sup> Due to the newness of this work, the CLC hasn't been applied much to librarianship yet. However, particularly when looking at examples of collaborative leadership, the CLC is a useful framework for consideration and offers a valuable and new perspective. CLC sets forth six dimensions of human competencies: future possibilities,

where one takes responsibility for shaping a sustainable future; engagement, where one crafts collaborative systems; innovation, where one finds novel and intelligent solutions; humanity, where one connects with others humanness; collective intelligence, where one cultivates different ideas for progress; and wholeness, where one sees the big picture and stays connected with the common good.

Looking at the six dimensions of human competencies we can see how JCLC addresses each. Future possibilities are front and center, as the conference looks to grow sustainably and empower with each iteration. Engagement is key to a good professional development experience, and JCLC excels at engaging its leaders and followers as we could see in the section of this paper that reviewed JCLC's history. Within engagement, JCLC fosters connectivity and collective action around creating space and supporting persons of color within librarianship. Innovation is present in the way the conference allows for creativity in modes of delivery, from traditional paper and poster presentations to panel discussions to workshops alongside keynotes and social events, as well as spanning a wide range of topics centered around the experiences of persons of color with regard to librarianship. The humanity aspect is held front and center in JCLC and this is one aspect in which JCLC differs from other professional development offerings within librarianship. Empathy, balance and mindfulness around the experiences of persons of color grounds JCLC in this dimension. Collective intelligence is integral to a professional conference, particularly a collaborative, volunteer-led one such as JCLC, where the content is the work of a large number of people pooling their talents together. The dimension of wholeness is present in JCLC through its fostering of a supportive space for persons of color, giving their experiences in a majority white profession context, allowing them a welcoming

place to contribute their talents, and creating a network of mutual support.

To conclude, JCLC has been and will continue to be a successful model of shared, collective leadership around race within the library profession. Leaders and followers depend on each other, teach and lead each other, and often exchange places or merge during the course of individual conferences, not to mention over the past 15 years or so of the history of the caucuses' association. JCLC is a great example of servant leadership, in its leaders' devotion to improving the profession and fostering community as well as its followers' desire to collaborate and move the profession forward on issues of race. It is also a prime example of adaptive leadership in its use of collaborative, values-based problem solving to create a holding environment for issues of race in librarianship. JCLC can be seen as an example of transforming leadership in its leaders' intention to lift followers up to "higher levels of motivation and morality"<sup>42</sup> through self-empowerment. And finally, JCLC is an excellent model of collective leadership for sustainability, meeting all points on the Collective Leadership Compass.

A critique commonly expressed around leadership studies is that leadership frameworks are used in hindsight, and that examples are drawn in a way that supports the chosen framework. This article is certainly guilty of that approach; however, this activity still provides for reflection and contemplative action. In particular, the study of the professional development conference as an exemplar of leadership for a profession or association is an area of study ripe for further analysis. For librarianship, it is useful to consider practical examples of leadership like conferences through the various frameworks presented by those who study leadership. It is useful for illuminating what works well and why it might do so. For my part, it was a privilege to witness the latest JCLC first hand, and to see the supportive and collaborative community

the persons of color within librarianship have created for one another. Drawing upon the history of JCLC in context with various leadership frameworks does demonstrate what JCLC does well to support its mission. It is a testament to the fact that not all leadership has to be Machiavellian or profit driven, and that a collaborative community of care can be sustaining and sustainable, accomplishing higher values-based

goals while still providing a small profit for the involved ethnic communities.

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<sup>32</sup> Heifetz, 1994, p. 71-72.

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