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## What Collaboration Means to Us: Advancing Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Initiatives in the Library Profession

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## *What Collaboration Means to Us*

### Advancing Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Initiatives in the Library Profession

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As the global pandemic of COVID-19 continues to disrupt our world and affect many lives, we would like to take a moment to reflect on what collaboration means for the library profession and libraries as a whole in terms of the values of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI).<sup>1</sup>

We have witnessed major crises emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic – police violence against Black and Brown communities, Anti-Asian assaults and xenophobic sentiments, and the unveiling of structural racism within higher education and across libraries. Library associations and organizations, such as the American Library Association (ALA), the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), the Black Caucus of the American Library Association (BCALA), and the Asian Pacific American Librarians Association (APALA), have issued anti-racism statements.<sup>2</sup> Back in April 2021, we were invited to give a guest presentation for a library and information science (LIS) class on social responsibility and EDI efforts in the profession. We took this opportunity to collaborate and share our perspectives on how challenging it has been to advance EDI initiatives in the library field. Here we highlight our reflections from the presentation.

First, we see that many institutions of higher education are aiming to address structural racism within their institutions in various ways today.

We find it fascinating that a growing number of academic libraries are condemning racism by issuing statements, empowering their diversity committees, or recruiting EDI-focused librarians. However, we are also aware of the difficulties of eliminating racism that has been institutionally embedded and perpetuated in policies and practices for many years. The questions are: Are these efforts effective and dynamic enough to further promote EDI in the library workplace? Will we see positive changes in the longstanding structural racism across the profession? Only time will tell whether these changes will be impactful or simply serve as glib gestures that won't amount to much change at all.

Prior to COVID-19, having served on library diversity committees, we found various roadblocks in supporting the value of EDI in our institutions. We learned from experience that an effective way to promote EDI work is through collaboration. Building collaborative partnerships with teaching faculty, student groups, and different campus partners was instrumental in leading conversations and programmatic changes in the library. These included setting up student-led exhibits and co-hosting events with faculty focusing on specific topics to cultivate campus interests, such as Human Trafficking Awareness Day, Nowruz (Iranian New Year), and peaceful conflict resolution. In addition, we partnered with the Global Education Office to



host International Coffee Hour in the library, an event where international students presented about their countries of origin to raise awareness of global identities and experiences among attendees.

Other critical activities have included partnering with student groups and faculty in diversifying library collections in respective areas, such as graphic novels, comics, and children's literature, to promote more diverse representation in these resources. We also developed a LibGuide (resource guide) for the Library Diversity Committee and shared resources and reading lists on various EDI topics. Additionally, the committee organized public programs and events that highlighted specific community interests, such as a series of events about Indigenous communities and the "Sorting Out Race" exhibition with the Kauffman Museum at Bethel College, a traveling exhibit focused on "cultural artifacts and racial identity as viewed through the framework of the thrift store donation."<sup>3</sup> These proactive efforts of the diversity committee have resulted in important dialogues, highlighting the committee's commitment to fostering collaboration across the campus and its surrounding communities.

However, as we highlighted in the LIS class, there have been barriers preventing us from moving forward with these efforts and facilitating EDI work. Engaging with different campus partners on EDI initiatives has been much more successful and effective than engaging with internal library stakeholders. Especially prior to COVID-19, library decision makers and key stakeholders, such as library administration, were often not engaged in the process or did not fully understand why this work was critical to the library. While there are barriers and challenges in any form of collaboration, this has been particularly true of collaboration that involves EDI initiatives. In many cases, such activities require resources such as time, money, and

human resources, making it imperative for library administration to actively participate in the activities or encourage staff to participate. Some administrators may emphasize "immediate results" of such engagement, which in itself may be an obstacle to EDI efforts. EDI initiatives often require a fundamental review and change in the culture of the entire library organization, and therefore need to be viewed as a long-term, ongoing effort. There's also resistance from many of our colleagues – whether it is resistance to change, status quo thinking, fear, or misperception, we need to actively engage with our colleagues and demonstrate why their participation is necessary to transform the organization's culture.

Certainly, not all our colleagues are resistant to EDI work; there was a committee made up of volunteers across the library to support EDI initiatives, but they were often the same people, which creates fatigue and burnout. Where is everyone else? Why are they not participating in the committee, attending our events, or seeing the importance of supporting EDI values? These are challenges that we've seen before and during COVID-19. Fostering EDI initiatives requires a collective understanding and willful partnerships across and beyond the library.

We take the opportunity to collaborate with colleagues interested in advancing EDI values. Collaboration means to us an opportunity to build new relationships under such values and vision in our institution. It also means an opportunity to enable change – minor or major – and to see new ways of doing things. For example, there needs to be more re-allocation of funds to support EDI initiatives in a sustainable manner. We would like to see a deeper commitment to understanding the process to engage with internal and external stakeholders; this can include hosting townhalls, holding retreats, and engaging in inclusive processes that are transparent. Obviously, we must collaborate with colleagues internally and externally, but we also anticipate

challenges and hurdles in promoting EDI initiatives, even now, during a racial reckoning in the United States brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and other external factors.

Now, one major concern across academic libraries is with repopulation—reopening library spaces and mandating employees to return to work on site. Library administration needs to plan carefully in supporting colleagues, particularly those who have been historically marginalized and undervalued because of the rising violence against them. What protocols do you have in place to ensure the safety of your library workers and users? How can your library effec-

tively incorporate EDI resources and best practices demonstrated by professional associations, such as ALA, ACRL, and fellow libraries?<sup>4</sup>

The library, as an entity, cannot sustain its existence on its own, particularly when addressing EDI matters. It must continue to collaborate with campus and community stakeholders in addressing and advancing EDI initiatives.

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<sup>1</sup> We want to note that we previously worked together at Fresno State and now Raymond works at a different institution.

<sup>2</sup> American Library Association, *ALA Executive Board Supports APALA in Recognizing and Condemning Ongoing Anti-Asian Hate Crimes*, March 11, 2021, <https://www.ala.org/news/press-releases/2021/03/ala-executive-board-supports-apala-recognizing-and-condemning-ongoing-anti>; Asian/Pacific American Librarians Association. *APALA Statement Against Anti-Asian Violence*, March 3, 2021, <https://www.apala-web.org/apala-statement-against-anti-asian-violence/>; Association of College and Research Libraries, *ACRL Supports ALA, BCALA, and APALA Statements Condemning Violence and Racism*, June 2, 2020, <https://acrl.ala.org/acrlinsider/acrl-supports-ala-bcala-and-apala-statements-condemning-violence-and-racism/>; Black

Caucus, *Statement Condemning Increased Violence and Racism Towards Black Americans and People of Color*, May 28, 2020, <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/sites/ala.org/advocacy/files/content/Statement%20Condemning%20Increased%20Violence%20and%20Racism%20Towards%20Black%20Americans%20and%20People%20of%20Color.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Kauffman Museum, *Sorting Out Race: Examining Racial Identity and Stereotypes in Thrift Store Donations*, <https://kauffmanmuseum.org/exhibitions/travelingexhibits/sortingoutrace/>.

<sup>4</sup> American Library Association, *Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion*, <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/diversity>; Association of College and Research Libraries, *Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion*, <https://www.ala.org/acrl/issues/edi>.

