Diversity from the inside out: Cultivating an inclusive library environment

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Abstract:

This chapter considers some essential elements needed to cultivate an inclusive library environment. These include environmental scanning, the benefits of establishing a committee focused on inclusion and diversity, building communities of practice, and training/learning opportunities for library employees. Also considered are community outreach initiatives, both on and off campus, which extend the libraries' missions of promoting DEI. These initiatives are measurable and impactful and have a significant influence on recruitment and retention.

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Introduction

To address and better serve the issues facing larger and more diverse campus populations nationwide, a growing number of academic libraries are engaging in work involving diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). When academic libraries create environments that truly live up to the values of DEI, they directly contribute to fostering a welcoming space for both users and staff.

This chapter considers some essential elements needed to cultivate an inclusive library environment. These include environmental scanning, the benefits of establishing a committee focused on inclusion and diversity, building communities of practice, and training/learning opportunities for library employees. Also considered are community outreach initiatives, both on and off campus, which extend the libraries' missions of promoting DEI. These initiatives are measurable and impactful and have a significant influence on recruitment and retention.

In order to deconstruct oppressive policies and cultures in our institutions and promote healthy work cultures, libraries should establish a diversity committee or taskforce, craft a diversity plan or vision document that communicates the library's plan to advance DEI, and develop strategic partnerships to advance the diversity plan. It is important to start by conducting a thorough environmental scan to review and analyze the internal and external factors and trends that affect a library's current and future actions around diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Environmental Scanning

Environmental scanning is the process of identifying internal and external challenges and opportunities that may potentially influence an organization's strategic direction.[1] Environmental scanning helps libraries make informed decisions about DEI through an intricate process of identifying needs, gathering information about those needs, analyzing information, communicating results, and creating priorities.

Libraries can use a variety of information sources to conduct an environmental scan. These include library employees, patrons, and external data tools such as ClimateQUAL and the Mellon-Ithaka S+R study on inclusion, diversity, and equity.[2] Data collected from these sources can be used to inform a library's strategic direction and the goals in diversity plans that seek to bring about the changes that employees and patrons would like to see in library environments, both physical and virtual.

The strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) technique is one of the oldest and most popular and accurate ways to extract crucial data from patrons and employees. It involves identifying characteristics in each of the four categories in order to evaluate an organization's internal strengths and weaknesses, as well as their external opportunities and threats. This technique can be used in focus groups with library employees to unearth areas that merit consideration. For example, librarians at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro extracted information from the Mellon-Ithaka study suggesting that librarian-exempt employees did not adequately reflect or represent the level of diversity in the student body. However, nonexempt staff employees almost mirrored the racial and ethnic diversity in the student body. The SWOT technique was extremely helpful in this example because it generated a plethora of suggestions to address the lack of ethnic and racial diversity among our exempt librarians. Some of these suggestions resulted in the creation of a more robust plan to embed diversity and inclusion in our recruitment and retention practices. As a result, a system was created to ensure that all job postings were intentionally shared with a number of listservs that were connected to various caucuses, associations, divisions, sections, chapters, and other interest groups, with the intention of attracting a more diverse pool of candidates. A provost-approved diversity statement was also embedded in every job post.

The data gathered during the environmental scan was used by the libraries' committee on diversity and inclusion (CoDI) to inform the strategies and initiatives that were implemented to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion in our libraries.

Creating Committees to Explore DEI: Readiness and Needs

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[1] Donald Chrusciel, "Environmental Scan: Influence on Strategic Direction," *Journal of Facilities Management* 9, no. 1 (2011): 9.

[2] Ithaka S+R, "Inclusion, Diversity, and Equity: Members of the Association of Research Libraries: Employee Demographics and Director Perspectives," August 30, 2017, https://sr.ithaka.org/publications/inclusion-diversity-and-equity-arl.

Undertaking the tasks of completing an environmental scan, crafting a library DEI plan, implementing the plan, leading initiatives, and checking the library's pulse represents a lot of critical work. Who will ensure that the work gets done? This is where a library's CoDI becomes crucial to advancing the institution's DEI efforts. A CoDI plays a prominent role in facilitating the environmental scan, crafting the DEI plan, leading the implementation and assessment process, and supporting the work that follows.

The charge to create a diversity committee can come from either the top or bottom of the organizational hierarchy. Library administrators or other university officials can order the creation of a committee to handle a DEI initiative and appoint staff to begin. Conversely, the desire and directive to create the committee can come from the staff members. Regardless of the origin, the work of creating a diversity committee requires the support of both the administration and library staff. Administration should be supportive of the initiatives and programming created by the nascent committee and allow for staff to participate. Buy-in for staff is also vital, since their participation is critical for the success of the committee.

There are a variety of reasons why a library would form a diversity committee. Two common reasons include supporting the larger institutional goals or mission surrounding DEI and the library responding to potential gaps that DEI initiatives can fill. In the current academic climate, it is vital for academic libraries to demonstrate their value to their institution in a quantifiable way. Many institutions have mission statements that include language around valuing diversity in their communities and affirm their dedication to inclusion and equity. Forming a library diversity committee is one potential avenue to demonstrate their support for institutional DEI initiatives. Responding to any potential gaps in library programming or development regarding DEI uncovered during an environmental scan is another common reason for creating a committee. It can be easier for administration and staff to pinpoint where these potential gaps are and determine how and in what ways a dedicated diversity committee can meet library and campus needs.

When forming a diversity committee, it is important to be mindful of both the composition of the membership and the workload of the staff members who participate. In instances where the committee membership has not been appointed by the administration, the chairperson or individual tasked with forming the committee should strive for equity and equal representation from various units or departments, as well as the type of staff member involved. Overrepresentation from one unit or department can have a potentially detrimental effect when building a nascent committee of which the goal is to include as much of the staff as possible. Creating as much staff buy-in as is feasible for the committee is important and will impact the level of support for the initiatives that the committee will produce in the future. Particularly within academic libraries, there is commonly a divide between professional and paraprofessional staff members. Extending the invitation to participate to all staff members, regardless of employment status, should serve to foster a collaborative environment in the library and generally engender positive working relationships among the staff. Another consideration to make when forming a diversity committee is the existing workloads and service commitments of staff members when soliciting members. A new committee usually requires extra work, and its members often must commit more time to it compared with an established one.

When striving to make the composition of the committee as diverse as possible, another point to be mindful of is the hidden workload of many people of color in librarianship and academia in general. It has been well documented within library literature that people of color frequently encounter a hidden workload that includes extra service obligations, because it is common for the individual to be one of the few available to serve on any number of committees.[3] This is especially pertinent for librarians who are tenure-track and/or have faculty status, since service is often a required component for earning promotion and tenure.

Crafting a Plan to Advance DEI

A DEI or diversity plan is a vision document used to communicate a library's DEI goals and the actions needed to achieve those goals. A well-crafted DEI plan will empower employees to cultivate a more inclusive library environment that is more welcoming to peers and patrons, both physically and remotely. The goals for DEI plans are usually focused around three to five categories: recruitment and retention, communication, inclusive work climate, barrier-free access, and dialogue and learning. However, each environmental scan should inform the priorities, goals, objectives, and action steps for the individual library's DEI plan. The following are sample plans from authors' institutions illustrating how the final product may differ.

UNCG Diversity Strategic Plan

In 2007, the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) libraries formed an ad hoc committee to explore diversity issues, not only to address general issues of diversity and inclusivity in the library but also to prepare for the implementation of the post-MLIS diversity residency program. Among the proposed recommendations in the committee's report was the development of a diversity coordinator position, which would serve as chair of an official University Libraries Diversity Committee (ULDC). The ULDC was among the first committees on the UNCG campus created for the principal purpose of addressing diversity issues. Being among the first of such committees, the ULDC served as a model for the UNCG Chancellor's Advisory Committee on Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, which formed in 2009.

Created as a five-year, long-term plan with intermediate updates, the first diversity strategic plan functions as a way to report the progress and accomplishments by the library in addition to outlining the strategic goals. The plan outlines six strategic goals for the library:

- Create and sustain a welcoming, supportive, and inclusive campus climate.
- Develop programming and outreach for the libraries and the community in support of diversity.
- Support diversity in the UNCG curriculum with a collection that represents the diversity of the UNCG experience.
- Create a library environment that reflects diversity.
- Prepare UNCG students to live and work in a diverse global world.
- Develop and execute a comprehensive diversity and inclusion communication plan.

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[3] Joan Howland, "Beyond Recruitment: Retention and Promotion Strategies to Ensure Diversity and Success," *Library Administration & Management* 13, no. 1 (1999): 10; Ione T. Damasco and Dracine Hodges, "Tenure and Promotion Experiences of Academic Librarians of Color," *College & Research Libraries* 73, no. 3 (2012): 282.

The ULDC reports on the progress of the goals and any sub-goals or action items subsequently articulated.

University of Houston Plan for Advancing Diversity and Inclusion

In 2017, the CoDI was formed at the University of Houston (UH) to discuss and determine potential areas for a library-wide, one-year diversity plan. This plan included activities centered on recruitment and retention, barrier-free access, diversity training and education, and improving workplace climate. During the planning process, the CoDI realized the need to develop long-term sustainable goals that would guide the university libraries' DEI work.

The CoDI's plan had two primary and complementary aims. First, the document needed to be focused, brief, specific, and easily understood. Second, the document needed to represent a unified vision for the entire UH Libraries system. In order to achieve library-wide impact, the goal was that the document would be read and implemented by all library employees. The plan was designed to be implemented at three levels—individual, departmental, and administrative—while also remaining general enough in nature so every employee, regardless of position, title, or rank, could contribute to the libraries' goal to advance DEI. The plan has developed and changed over time; the current version of the plan was developed as a result of an intentional and responsive drafting process. What began as a one-year internal plan has evolved into a library-wide public document that seeks to provide guidance for all library employees. The vision statement provided a clear understanding of what we wanted to achieve:

> To foster an inclusive virtual and physical environment that welcomes diverse learners, researchers, and library staff. To proactively develop spaces, services, programs, and resources that embrace and promote the transformative power of diversity.

Once the CoDI had articulated its vision, the committee created three goals:

- Foster commitment to diversity and inclusion through dialogue and learning.
- Reflect diversity and inclusion through recruitment and retention practices.
- Remove access barriers to services, resources, and spaces.

Each goal was designed to be clear, practical, and flexible enough to accommodate the unique needs of each department. Instead of listing action items, the plan sought to communicate a shared vision for individuals and teams. The CoDI found that by outlining broad goals in organized subject areas, the plan achieved its primary objectives. For example, each employee at the library is required to submit a yearly goal plan, and encouraging the use of the diversity plan helps sharpen focus on building awareness and goal setting around diversity issues.

The CoDI started the development of a four-year UH Libraries' Diversity Plan by engaging library stakeholders in an environmental scan to collect input and data to guide the building of goals. The CoDI used a SWOT analysis tool to facilitate sessions with library employees around diversity. Participants used sticky notes to write down ideas and thoughts about diversity at UH, which were then sorted and prioritized into SWOT categories. Some of the issues that arose

centered around concerns about the perceived differences between librarians and staff, the lack of diversity in library administration, outreach to patrons with disabilities, and the types of training that would be the most useful to library personnel, students, and the university as a whole. The CoDI transcribed everyone's responses onto a master data sheet. Data were then further sorted into different themes under internal strengths and weaknesses and external opportunities and threats. The rich data that was collected and analyzed helped the CoDI understand the strengths and gaps inherent in the UH Libraries around diversity and inclusion issues.

In addition to SWOT analysis activities, the CoDI also reviewed diversity plans from peer institutions and various demographic and assessment documents such as UH Libraries Staff Demographics; UH Libraries' ClimateQUAL Organizational Climate and Diversity Assessment; the Mellon-Ithaka S+R study on Inclusion, Diversity, and Equity: Members of the Association of Research Libraries; University of Houston Facts at a Glance; and Demographics for the City of Houston and the United States. From these resources, the CoDI was able to get a more complete picture of the UH Libraries. While the majority of data reflected conditions similar to other peer academic libraries (largely female and white), UH Libraries also have a much more diverse workforce than most, which is a reflection of the diversity of the university and the city of Houston's populations in general.

DEI Plans in Action: Enhancing the Library Environment

For an institution to earn attention as an ally and promoter of diversity and inclusion at the community, national, and international levels, DEI standards must be entrenched as part of the work ethic of library employees. One way to accomplish this is to establish staff development opportunities to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion as fundamental values to be considered and applied to staff and faculty work in all library departments. The ULDC identified two staff development objectives to strengthen these values within the library: cultivate an inclusive environment by opening dialogue among employees, and develop skills and cross-cultural competencies that can be incorporated into daily workflows.

Although cultivating an inclusive environment by opening dialogue sounds as though it should be the easiest to accomplish among the proposed goals, it is deceptively difficult to implement in a practical manner. First, people must be enticed into a conversation. Additionally, topics of discussion may involve volatile issues, in which people may be afraid of offering their opinion out of concern for hurting someone's feelings. Conversely, some individuals may overshare their perspective, thus alienating everyone in the process. Finally, creating an inclusive environment for library employees means establishing that everyone benefits from the promotion of equity and diversity, which can be a challenging idea to persuade a homogenous workforce to embrace.

The ULDC organized two types of events to promote dialogue among library staff. Among the most popular was the diversity movie series, which featured a video about some aspect of diversity, followed by a discussion among attendees. The first of such films shown was *Voices of North Carolina* (2005), a documentary highlighting the richness of linguistic diversity throughout the state. This proved successful for initial "buy-in" of support from library employees, as everyone in the film had a dialect or accent; so, all staff could relate to this aspect

of diversity. In addition to the movie series, the ULDC sponsored "lunch and learns," in which staff were encouraged to spend their lunch break listening to presenters from within the libraries or external to the libraries or university speak on a topic of some relevance to diversity. An example of a typical "lunch and learn" included a panel discussion held by Middle Eastern students describing and discussing the differences between libraries in their home countries and those in the United States. As UNCG supports a large international student presence, including a substantial body of Middle Eastern students, the program was both enlightening about cross-cultural practices and about practical applications regarding understanding the knowledge barriers Middle Eastern students may experience when accessing UNCG Libraries.

ULDC's second objective was to develop the diversity and inclusion skill sets of library employees through specialized training and cultural competency programs. In order to incorporate such specialized training for staff, the ULDC collaborated with various offices on campus, including the Office of Accessibility Resources and Service and Safe Zone (LGBTQ+ education) through the Office of Intercultural Engagement. ULDC has organized workshops for library staff about supporting a wide variety of patrons, such as those with mobility issues, learning challenges, speech and communication challenges, LGBTQ+ students, and students at high risk. Such training educates library staff in better understanding the needs of these students and provides practices that can be incorporated into daily work routines. When these workshops are held, the committee schedules at least three sessions at different times of the day to make certain day and evening staff can attend. All workshops and activities, whether conducted by internal personnel or external, were assessed through a survey handed out after the event. The survey included yes/no questions about the quality of the content of the workshop and an additional comment section for suggestions about future programming.

Communities of Practice

The concept of "communities of practice" was coined by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger in 1991 and further refined by Wenger in 1998. A community of practice (CoP) is defined as " collective learning that results in practices that reflect both the pursuit of our enterprises and the attendant social relations. These practices are thus the property of a kind of community created over time by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise." [4] Essentially, a CoP is a social learning group created by people who share a common interest in building a community, which can be virtual or physical. A CoP can help individuals explore deep-level diversity, such as psychological differences, including personality, attitudes, and values, that are better understood through interaction with one another.[5] UH Libraries used a CoP to promote such interactions and learning around DEI.

There are four elements that contribute to the success and longevity of a CoP: a coordinator, facilitators, ground rules, and courageous participants. At UH Libraries, the coordinator schedules and promotes discussions and selects and trains staff members to facilitate. The

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[4] Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 45.
[5] Kristen M. Klein and Mo Wang, "Deep-Level Diversity and Leadership," *American Psychologist* 65, no. 9 (2010): 932‑33.

facilitator recommends readings or videos compiled by the CoDI. Ground rules are the most fundamental part of preserving the integrity of social learning environments. UH Libraries have adopted a list of norms from the Alliance of White Anti-Racists Everywhere-LA that is distributed and declared at the start of each discussion:

- Welcome multiple viewpoints. Speak from your own experience by using "I" statements. Ask questions to understand the sources of disagreements.
- Own your intentions and your impacts. Respect each other's experiences and feelings by taking responsibility for the effects of your words. On the other hand, if you have a strong reaction to something, let the group know. Be open to dialogue.
- Work to recognize your privileges. Use this space to recognize and investigate your privileges (for example: class, gender, sexual orientation, ability).
- Take risks and lean into discomfort. Challenge yourself to contribute even if it is not perfectly formulated.
- Step back. Share speaking time and try to speak after others who have not spoken.
- Notice and name group dynamics in the moment. We are all responsible for this space. Be aware of how others are responding or not responding. Ask for a "timeout" or dialogue if needed.
- Actively listen. Use your energy to listen to what is said before thinking about how to respond.
- Challenge with care. Find ways to respectfully challenge others and be open to challenges of your own views.
- Maintain confidentiality. Share the message, not the messenger.
- Break it down. Use simple language and background information when necessary. Ask for clarification if needed.[6]

These norms help to set the atmosphere, which is known as "brave space," for intellectual growth through learning and sharing. Brave spaces are inclusive and meant to prepare participants for the possibility that they might experience discomfort due to the nature of some topics. Norming can thus contribute to the success of the CoP. These norms are in no way comprehensive; however, they are precepts that help to uphold the integrity of our CoP.

Strategic Partnerships and Expansion

A diversity committee should seek not only to promote the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion among library staff but to be known as a leader in engaging the campus community on these issues. University libraries hold unique positions, as they can address and support the needs of campus students, faculty, and staff while seeking to publicize relevant services and resources by disseminating information and providing educational presentations.

Libraries can maximize their efforts by collaborating with other campus organizations to develop and implement diversity initiatives, resulting in positive returns on investment. The advantages of these collaborations are compelling, increasing access to target audiences and consolidating

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[6] AWARE-LA, "Communication Guidelines for a Brave Space," https://www.awarela.org/s/04-AWARE-LA-Brave-Space-Guidelines-and-History_.pdf.

financial resources through cosponsorship, which often results in more strategic support from faculty and university administration. For example, UH Libraries' first Diversity Day event was a joint venture between UH's Center for Diversity and Inclusion (CDI) and the CoDI. The CoDI delivered workshops that explored the meaning and impact of diversity and examined personal identities and intersectionality in order to promote dialogue and learning around various topics relating to DEI. At UNCG, educational presentations ranged from information literacy and research techniques to institutional history. Presentations relating to diversity in institutional history were particularly popular. These included sessions on the history of African Americans on campus, the history of the LGBTQ+ community on campus, and the history of students with disabilities on campus. Exhibits, both long-term and pop-up, relating to the history of diversity are featured as part of these classes, which take place in the library.

At UNCG, similar outreach was coordinated with multiple campus and student programs to create a diversity and global engagement exposition. The expo was interactive and student-centered—student organizations, particularly multicultural student groups, were invited to the library to partake in festivities, share their initiatives, collaborate with other organizations, recruit new members, and cultivate shared experiences. It is now an annual event and continues to be a very effective opportunity to nurture and strengthen relationships with other campus units. The event created a spotlight for multicultural student groups, which in turn enabled them to generate membership interest. It gave new and existing students an opportunity to learn about and join various student organizations while engaging in the diversity on campus. The event was well attended—over two hundred students participated. A survey was used to collect data from participants at the expo, which helped to identify some critical areas that the libraries needed to improve in order to create a more welcoming and inclusive library environment. We learned that aesthetics or sensory cues weigh heavily on students' perceptions of the library and their willingness to approach librarians. Students, both foreign and local, indicated that visual cues, such as multinational flags/banners and artifacts of cultural or historical significance, are helpful in reducing anxiety and creating a sense of belonging. Fifty-three percent of the survey respondents indicated that they were a native of a country other than the United States. Also, 60 percent of the respondents indicated that they learned something new about another culture. This spoke volumes of the level of cultural diversity and interactions provided, and prompted participants to request that the event continue annually.

Post-MLIS Diversity Resident Librarian Program

Another method to enhance the work environment while focusing on the level of equity within both the individual library and the profession is to create a library diversity resident program. Diversity residencies within academic libraries are entry-level term positions, commonly two or three years in length, with the intent to recruit recent MLS/MLIS graduates from historically underrepresented backgrounds. Residency programs are a practical and effective way for libraries to demonstrate their commitment to diversity and inclusion in their libraries and the profession, as well as help to address the employability skills gap in library and information science education. Successful recruitment and implementation of the residency program provides professional development, training, support, and opportunities to the early career librarians who are hired. Residencies also provide a twofold benefit to both the hosting library and profession by simultaneously addressing the issue of recruitment and improving diversity in the workforce.

Implementing diversity resident programs are a practical and effective way for libraries to demonstrate their commitment to DEI.

In 2008, UNCG established a diversity residency program that has since hired, trained, and mentored six librarians of color. During their tenures, all six residents have made significant contributions to the university libraries and the library profession. All six residents have led and/or coordinated initiatives that impacted the libraries' plan to advance DEI. These initiatives include the Civil Rights Greensboro digitization project, liaising with campus diversity centers, coordinating author lecture series, collection development projects, assessment projects, and teaching and learning projects.

Assessment

It is advantageous to conduct an assessment both before and after any implementation of an initiative to address diversity and equity within the library. Survey tools, such as ClimateQUAL, can determine weaknesses that must be addressed within the organizational structure and culture. Additionally, surveys that examine the climate for students and faculty can determine needs in terms of services and resources. Such assessment tools provide direction for staff development programming and the diversity strategic plan.

An assessment of staff development programming offers many benefits. Obviously, surveys provide a means to gauge the relevance of the programming to meet staff needs. For example, if the library serves a patron population with specific accessibility and mobility needs, a survey can indicate if the training provided genuinely offers strategies for making the library and its resources more accessible, or if the training is too theoretical. Surveys with open-ended questions that solicit recommendations for further programming supply a means for staff to be involved and have a stake in the promotion of diversity and equity in the library. Additionally, allowing staff the opportunity for anonymous feedback may reveal if any resistance to such training exists in the library's culture.

Of course, assessment following the institution of any diversity and equity initiative is crucial to measuring its success. Thorough surveys and focus groups can also provide insight through quantitative and qualitative data into the strengths and weaknesses of an initiative. If a library implements significant and complex changes in outreach and services, it can be anticipated that certain aspects of the transformation will be more successful than other modifications. It is important to remember that diversity and equity assessment is a continuous and multifaceted process in which the library can acknowledge and address the challenges in its environment while encouraging and building upon its strengths.

Conclusion

Before engaging in DEI work, one essential component for success in the academic library is support for these initiatives from its administration. Having library leadership enthusiastically support these DEI initiatives made it possible for each institution to grow in this area and make progress. The tangible actions outlined in this chapter that were used to establish engagement in DEI work were all implemented at UH and UNCG, with successful results. Conducting an

environmental scan not only accurately assesses the needs of library users and staff but also gauges what steps the library should take next. Forming a committee to organize initiatives is another essential step to getting started and making progress with DEI efforts. The establishment of a strategic plan helps guide the committee toward offering inclusive diversity initiatives, such as the ones created by UNCG and UH, and provides transparency to the larger community served by the library. These plans can include outreach efforts, such as building strategic partnerships around the campus and the community, as well as offering programming that reaches beyond the library. Finally, libraries can work to actively foster a positive workplace environment where staff can get training on DEI topics and begin to build a community of practice. Through programs such as workshops and discussion sessions, libraries can begin working toward a more open and inclusive workplace.

The significance of this work is important in a changing academic landscape. In addition to better serving the faculty, students, and larger university community, engagement with DEI work aids in the recruitment and retention of librarians from underrepresented groups. Initiatives by UNCG, such as the creation of the ACE Scholars program and the Diversity Residency for recent MLIS graduates, exhibit two successful approaches to increasing representation in the field through DEI initiatives. Creation of an inclusive space for staff and users alike should be an essential component to the defined mission of the library.