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Introducing Cultural Competency in Libraries

A Case Study in Grassroots Professional Development

Katherine Kapsidelis and Elizabeth Galoozis

Introduction

The case study described in this chapter examines a series of internal trainings on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) topics that took place at the University of Southern California Libraries in 2017 and 2018. The professional development trainings were organized by an ad hoc group who planned the initiative in order to develop a shared understanding of DEI issues among library employees.

In addition to providing a detailed description of the content covered in each of these workshops, this chapter will describe and analyze the planning process, along with successes and challenges, of this training series. The authors—who were part of the planning committee—will reflect on their inspirations and goals for the workshops and the ways they sought to assess the effectiveness of the program and to keep the momentum going after its conclusion. Our goal is

to provide a model of implementing DEI-related initiatives through grassroots planning.

Context and Inspiration

The University of Southern California (USC) is a large research university located in Los Angeles, California. USC Libraries comprises several libraries and over 200 faculty and staff members. Most libraries are on the University Park Campus; the exception is the Norris Medical Library, which is located about seven miles away from the main campus on the USC Health Sciences Campus.

In 2016, the USC provost's office instituted a new Diversity Council and required all schools and academic units, including the library, to develop a five-year diversity and inclusion plan.[1] While the library was responsible for naming diversity and inclusion liaisons from its faculty, the plan itself was drafted using input from all employees. No official committee or task force was assembled within the library to implement the diversity and inclusion plan; everyone was tasked with determining their own contributions and initiatives. Around the same time, the library released a new strategic plan, which in its vision statement calls for "a culture of commitment to our community and our colleagues and to developing diverse collections, services, spaces, and programs that embody that dedication."[2] So while DEI-related work was certainly happening in the library and across the university before 2016, these high-level initiatives spurred many of us to consider how we could contribute.

In the spring of 2017, the annual call for Dean's Challenge Grants came out. Dean's Challenge Grants are a program in the USC Libraries through which the dean of the library funds one-time programs or projects, defined broadly as innovative. Many of us were seeking opportunities to put theory into action and were eager to connect both the diversity and inclusion plan and the strategic plan to our proposals. One author (Elizabeth) invited a group of library employees (including the other author, Katherine) to participate in the grant initiative.[3] We decided to propose a program that would, as a first step, seek to develop a shared understanding of concepts and issues related to diversity, equity, and inclusion among USC Libraries employees. To focus our work and connect it to academic libraries, we explicitly concentrated on the first standard of the "Diversity Standards" of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), which enjoins library workers to "develop an understanding of their

own personal and cultural values and beliefs as a first step in appreciating the importance of multicultural identities" in their institutions.[4]

As detailed below, we proposed, and received funding for, a set of trainings and resources for the 2017–2018 academic year. The funding provided by the internal grant was used to provide honoraria for speakers and workshop refreshments; the awarding of the grant also helped signal the support of the library's administration for the workshop series.

The Workshops

Our goal was a substantial one: to begin developing a shared understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion issues among library employees. The bulk of our program consisted of a series of workshops that sought to train colleagues in baseline diversity-related cultural competence. ACRL, using a definition from the National Association of Social Workers, describes "cultural competence" as

> [a] congruent set of behaviors, attitudes, and policies that enable a person or group to work effectively in cross-cultural situations; the process by which individuals and systems respond respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures, languages, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, religions, and other diversity factors in a manner that recognizes, affirms, and values the worth of individuals, families, and communities and protects and preserves the dignity of each.[5]

Writing in the *Library Quarterly,* Patricia Montiel-Overall defines cultural competence as a "highly developed ability to understand and respect cultural differences and to address issues of disparity among diverse populations competently."[6]

We believed that a starting place for developing cultural competence was to foster a shared understanding of DEI ideas and issues and to encourage individual reflection on these concepts and how they connected with our work in the library. Beginning with individual understanding and action is also an approach advocated by proponents of "cultural humility." Within a library context, Hurley, Kostelecky, and Townsend define cultural humility as

> the ability to maintain an interpersonal stance that is other oriented in relation to aspects of cultural identity that are

most important to the other person, the ability to recognize the context in which interactions occur, and a commitment to redress power imbalances and other structural issues to benefit all parties.[7]

Twanna Hodge argues that to practice cultural humility, we must begin by interrogating our own explicit and implicit cultural biases as a first step toward understanding and mitigating how these inevitable biases impact our work in libraries.[8] A practice of cultural humility does not ask practitioners to learn the relevant cultural knowledge needed to understand or even identify the multiple identities that all patrons bring to the library; rather, it encourages individuals to be thoughtful and reflective in their interactions with others, keeping the impact of culture and bias in mind.[9] We aimed to work toward this kind of thoughtfulness and reflection through our workshops.

We also felt that it was important to disrupt the ideas of objectivity and neutrality. These concepts have been especially pernicious in libraries, which often center majority cultures as "objective" or "neutral." For example, regarding race, Robin DiAngelo writes the "belief in objectivity, coupled with positioning white people as outside of culture (and thus the norm for humanity), allows whites to view themselves as universal humans who can represent all of human experience."[10] We wanted participants to understand that microaggressions, bias, and racism are not problems that "others" have, but are rather issues that everyone—and especially white people, or those whose identities are considered "outside of culture" in libraries—has a responsibility to understand, confront, and redress.[11]

It was a challenge, however, to transform these ambitions into workshops that would be manageable in terms both of content for participants and of logistics for our planning team. The committee included members from both campuses who worked at different levels of the library hierarchy—including a contract librarian, heads of libraries, and a member of library administration—and who had varying job responsibilities. During initial planning sessions for the workshop series, we defined an explicit learning goal for each workshop (as detailed below). In order to accommodate different ways of learning, we also varied the method by which information was conveyed: via presentations, as part of interactive sessions, and through experiential and skills-based sessions. Another challenge was the distance that separates libraries located on USC's two campuses. For our second training, we were able to offer our workshop twice, once on each

campus—but scheduling and other logistical difficulties prevented us from offering second sessions for the other trainings.

Each workshop was facilitated by an expert outside the library. We leveraged our connections on campus and in the community to bring in experts who could speak authoritatively on DEI issues, but were also mindful of the importance of explicitly connecting the workshops to libraries and to the specific issues of our workplace. Our intention was for each workshop to build upon the previous ones, but also to be understandable for those unable to attend every one. The workshops were open to all library employees.

The first workshop's goal was to create a shared vocabulary by establishing definitions for diversity concepts and to discuss racial climate research in higher education. Shaun Harper had recently joined USC as the executive director of the new Race and Equity Center and kicked off the workshop series by addressing these topics. In meetings leading up to the first workshop, Dr. Harper asked us about what we saw as particular DEI-related challenges in the library, in order to focus on specific concepts. Some of the challenges we discussed were creating inclusive physical and digital spaces; mitigating bias when interacting with patrons (particularly around nationality); and making assumptions (by both patrons and fellow library employees) about library employees (for instance, assuming that women are less authoritative).

In his presentation, Dr. Harper laid a foundation by summarizing his extensive research on racial climates in higher education and introduced us to concepts like "onlyness" ("the psychoemotional burden of having to strategically navigate a racially politicized space occupied by few peers, role models, and guardians from one's same racial or ethnic group"[12]) and "stereotype threat" ("being at risk of confirming, as self-characteristic, a negative stereotype about one's group"[13]). He also shared findings specific to USC and discussed that although faculty and staff aspire to equity, very few are trained in it—and that race was perceived as a taboo topic of discussion on campus. He then invited us to reflect on diversity and equity within the library, collecting anonymous notecards from participants responding to the prompt "Write one diversity-related question you have long had, but haven't felt comfortable openly discussing it with colleagues in the USC Libraries." This led to a rich discussion on difficult issues that were particular to our library and also highlighted some uncomfortable truths—such as how much more racially diverse our staff is than our faculty (both at USC Libraries and USC more generally).

The goal of the second workshop was to define microaggressions and discuss them in the context of USC Libraries. We invited Cynthia Mari Orozco, librarian for equitable services at East Los Angeles College and founder of the *Microaggressions in Librarianship* blog,[14] to lead us in addressing this goal. In our preliminary discussions, we discussed what we aspired to get out of the workshop: to define microaggressions and what falls under that definition; to focus on individual strategies rather than one-off solutions; and to begin to create a culture of support for combating microaggressions and their effects. We had noted from Dr. Harper's workshop that participants responded well to anonymous interactivity and worked with Ms. Orozco to incorporate this technique. Ahead of time, she solicited examples of microaggressions from libraries employees through an online survey, using a definition from Derald Wing Sue and colleagues: "Racial microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color."[15] Participants were asked in the same survey if they had ever witnessed specific types of microaggressions in their work at the USC Libraries, from patrons or from library faculty and staff. We provided seven types of microaggressions as examples:

- members of dominant groups being called on, listened to, or praised more than members of nondominant groups in meetings or other situations
- dismissal of requests for equitable treatment (e.g., using preferred pronouns or accommodating disabilities)
- denial of privacy (e.g., commenting on or asking about disability or medical status)
- use of language that is racist, sexist, ableist, homophobic, and so on
- ascribing stereotypical characteristics to a certain group
- environmental microaggressions in the climate of the library
- assigning work based on race, gender, language, age, or other characteristics rather than on ability

Each category was checked off by at least four library employees who responded to the survey.

Ms. Orozco led two workshops, one at the University Park Campus and another at the Norris Medical Library on the Health Sciences Campus. The pre-workshop survey not only allowed participants to contribute examples

anonymously, but also gave them time to think through the provided definitions and examples of microaggressions. During the workshops, Ms. Orozco guided the discussion and the analysis of some of the scenarios that had been submitted. She also led the group in creating a set of strategies for addressing the microaggressions illustrated by the examples.

The goal of the third workshop was to become aware of how algorithms (among other factors) can unconsciously bias our work at both an organizational and an individual level and to learn how to actively work to interrupt bias. Two faculty members at USC presented different portions of the workshop. First, Safiya Umoja Noble (then of the Annenberg School for Communication) presented on her research on bias in search engines, libraries, and other information settings in order to ground our discussion. Specifically, Dr. Noble defined unconscious bias, differentiated it from microaggressions, and discussed bias in libraries and information systems in general, including in library workplaces and workforces.

In the second half of the workshop, Anita Dashiell-Sparks, associate dean of equity, diversity and inclusion at the School of Dramatic Arts, led participants in a training on interrupting bias in different library-based scenarios. Ms. Dashiell-Sparks began by leading us through an exercise using an "identity wheel" to identify external and internal parts of our individual identities and then related them to privilege and impression through one-on-one discussion in pairs. She also introduced us to the resource "To Equalize Power among Us: Tools for Change," which adapts questions and actions from *Breaking Old Patterns, Weaving New Ties: Alliance Building* by Margo Adair and Sharon Howell.[16] These questions and actions prompted us to consider ways of identifying and interrupting bias; for example, "Do I take responsibility for, think for, or speak for others?" and "Appreciate efforts that point out my mistakes or lack of awareness."

A final component of the grant project was a brainstorming meeting, which was open to all library employees. This meeting served as an opportunity to discuss what we had learned during the training series and to apply it directly to our workplace by developing tangible next steps related to DEI issues. Participants were invited to identify problems and to share ideas on concrete ways that we could work to expand the diversity and inclusiveness of the library, its services and collections, and the environment for its employees. Those unable to attend the meeting were invited to provide feedback virtually. These ideas grew into

the agenda of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Working Group, discussed in further detail later in the chapter.

To assess the quality and the impact of the program, we sent participants a survey after each training that provided an opportunity for feedback and reflection. Of the sixty-three responses that we received over the course of the workshop series, we received no ratings (on a five-point scale from Poor to Excellent) lower than average—and fifty-nine participants rated the trainings as either excellent or good. The survey also invited respondents to reflect on something that they might "do differently in your approach to working with patrons, instruction, and/or collections as a result of this training." In their responses, those who had attended the trainings discussed a variety of ideas for incorporating new knowledge about DEI topics into their work with colleagues, the public, and students. One wrote about setting up rules of engagement to foster more respectful and open discourse before meetings and classes; several discussed approaching others with more mindfulness and awareness of the way their actions can contribute to the creation of a more inclusive environment. Others reflected on the ways that institutions can reinforce bias and on how this might influence individual action. Although it is difficult to measure real-world behavioral impact, these responses show that those who attended the workshops made connections between the trainings and their work in the library.

Continuing Momentum and Lessons Learned

At the conclusion of the grant year, the group found ourselves with a long list of ideas to further implement the library's diversity and inclusion plan and wanted to put into action the knowledge we had gained during the workshops. In the absence of a formal body to enact these recommendations, the grant group decided to stay together to coordinate and prioritize efforts. Over time, we began actively working to recruit new members to what we decided to call the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Working Group (DEIWG). At our first post-grant meeting, we categorized the ideas of our colleagues into five broad themes: language, recruitment, physical space, patron/student and faculty engagement, and training and education.

One of our first projects was to create a *Diversity and Inclusion Resource Guide* that documented and reinforced concepts covered in the workshop. In addition to summarizing key ideas, definitions, and other takeaways from the trainings, the guide provided contextual information about the USC community. The authors were inspired by a presentation about diversity training at Loyola Marymount University; the presenters had led a campus-wide diversity training day, accompanied by a resource guide on which we modeled our own guide. The presenters highlighted the value of their resource guide in extending participants' learning and emphasized the importance within their guide of acknowledging minority and dominant populations as an initial step toward understanding.[17] The guide therefore included statistical information about the demographic makeup of library employees as well as USC's students, faculty, and staff. The committee worked with the library's in-house graphic designers to create a polished brochure that was professionally printed. The resource guide was distributed across USC Libraries, reaching those who may not have been able to attend the workshops; an electronic version is also internally available. It is also now given to new library employees as part of their onboarding.

The DEIWG found that our work organizing the trainings had provided us with the experience and authority to tackle other projects within the library. Spurred by conversations during the workshops, for example, we were able to immediately institute the inclusion of a diversity statement as part of the library's faculty hiring process. We organized workshops and meetings that addressed issues raised in the trainings and invited Dr. Noble to return to the libraries to speak at a DEI-themed Wikipedia edit-a-thon that took place as part of a campus-wide DEI week. Our committee also worked with a variety of partners within the library, particularly our faculty and staff governance organizations, to build recognition programs across departments in order to celebrate a wide variety of accomplishments and strengths. At the time of writing this chapter, other new projects include diversity reviews of our collections and increased efforts to make our resources and services more accessible to all patrons.

Discussions from our brainstorming session also helped us identify needs that could be addressed when outside opportunities arose. For example, participants from the brainstorming session identified the language on our websites and research guides as an area where the library could improve. So when we saw that ACRL was offering a webcast on how to use plain language to make web-based resources more accessible, we knew there would be an audience for an

organized viewing. This kind of momentum, as well as the increased awareness that the workshops created for action on DEI projects within the library, was a key success of the training series.

Important successes from the planning process included determining clear and thoughtful learning outcomes and varying the ways that information was presented to accommodate different learning preferences. Establishing these ideas as part of our proposal outline in the early stages of our planning process helped to guide the later work of the committee, making it easier for the group to work efficiently and collectively. Additionally, the creation of the *Diversity and Inclusion Research Guide* at the end of the training series institutionalized the concepts covered in the trainings while also making them accessible for those who were not able to attend. The guide also provided contextual institutional information to frame all of our work.

Based on our experience with this project, there are a few key aspects that we would change if we planned another workshop series. First, we would seek to more precisely measure the impact of the training series by developing larger-scale assessments—such as, for example, by conducting library-wide climate surveys before and after the trainings. The individual workshop surveys provided valuable feedback, but their scope was limited—and we have found it difficult to quantify broader change.

Second, we would form a more inclusive organizing committee. Our group came together based around a shared interest in DEI issues and was not formed to be intentionally representative of library employees. Our planning committee did include librarians from both campuses, which helped us to be thoughtful and proactive about attempting to make the trainings as accessible as possible for employees who do not work on the main campus. However, missing from the group were members of library staff without faculty status, in addition to representatives of some departments, such as Technical Services and Information Technology. Staff attendance at the workshops was low relative to that of faculty, and the inclusion of staff on the committee may have helped us to anticipate and address this issue. Similarly, while some student workers were invited to the workshops, none ultimately attended. A more representative committee may have been able to identify improvements to the workshops that would have increased their relevance or accessibility.

Finally, we could have done more during the workshop series to directly address and challenge white privilege—either during the trainings we had or by

planning an additional session that focused specifically on the issue. The pervasiveness and persistence of white privilege—and its pernicious effects in higher education, libraries, and the country—demand greater attention and action.

Our trainings have raised many issues that the new DEI working group is seeking to address through ongoing initiatives. This has highlighted the importance of dedicating ongoing resources to DEI trainings and initiatives—and points to a limitation of grassroots efforts such as the one described in this chapter. Although our project allowed us to experiment and plan a training series with a minimum of bureaucratic impediments, it has become clear to us that formal recognition and support is crucial to enabling larger and more systemic changes within an institution the size of USC Libraries. Ultimately, grassroots efforts must work in conjunction with institutional initiatives to make progress toward the goals outlined in this chapter.

Conclusion

To practice cultural humility is to engage in an ongoing effort—and beginning efforts like these workshops are helpful, since seeking to address diversity, equity, and inclusion issues can be overwhelming. Institutionalized discrimination and systemic oppression demand responses on an equivalent scale, and approaching DEI work in a piecemeal or a time-limited fashion can cause more harm than good. However, we found value in this training series as a foundational step, and hope that it can serve as a model for other libraries. We believe that even libraries with robust DEI programs could benefit from a similar workshop model as it is important to periodically reinforce the understanding of DEI concepts that can sometimes feel hollow when they are used as superficial buzzwords. Revisiting key terms is also an opportunity to cultivate a deeper and more nuanced understanding, and we found that the act of creating a consensus through discussion can also provide a springboard that allows for swift implementation of new initiatives.

Notes

1. University of Southern California, "Diversity at USC," accessed January 8, 2020, https://diversity.usc.edu/ (page content changed).
2. "USC Libraries Strategic Plan," last updated November 2017, https://libraries.usc.edu/sites/default/files/usc_libraries_strategic_plan_update_nov_2017.pdf.

3. The group consisted of Elizabeth Galoozis (head of information literacy); Cynthia Henderson (formerly associate dean of the Health Sciences Libraries and one of the libraries' diversity and inclusion liaisons); Karen Howell (head of Leavey Library and the other diversity and inclusion liaison); Katherine Kapsidelis (formerly reference and instruction librarian for special collections); Karin Saric (information services librarian for health sciences); and Marje Schuetze-Coburn (associate dean for faculty affairs).
4. Association of College and Research Libraries, "Diversity Standards: Cultural Competency for Academic Libraries," 2012, https://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/diversity.
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6. Patricia Montiel Overall, "Cultural Competence: A Conceptual Framework for Library and Information Science Professionals," *Library Quarterly* 79, no. 2 (April 2009): 176, https://doi.org/10.1086/597080.
7. David Hurley, Sarah Kostelecky, and Lori Townsend, "Cultural Humility in Libraries," *Reference Services Review* 47, no. 4 (August 2019): 549, ProQuest.
8. Twanna Hodge, "Integrating Cultural Humility into Public Services Librarianship," *International Information and Library Review* 51, no. 3 (July 3, 2019): 268–74. https://doi.org/10.1080/10572317.2019.1629070.
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10. Robin DiAngelo, "White Fragility," *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3, no. 3 (2011): 59.
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12. Shaun R. Harper et al., "Race and Racism in the Experiences of Black Male Resident Assistants at Predominantly White Universities," *Journal of College Student Development* 52, no. 2 (March 2011): 190.
13. Claude M. Steele and Joshua Aronson, "Stereotype Threat and the Intellectual Test Performance of African Americans," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 69, no. 5 (1995): 797.
14. *Microaggressions in Librarianship* blog, accessed January 8, 2020, https://lismicroaggressions.tumblr.com/.
15. Derald Wing Sue et al., "Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Implications for Clinical Practice," *American Psychologist* 62, no. 4 (2007): 271.
16. Margo Adair and Sharon Howell, *Breaking Old Patterns, Weaving New Ties* (San Francisco: Tools for Change, 1994).
17. Elisa Slater-Acosta et al., "A Change Is Gonna Come: Renewing Information Workers' Commitment to Social Justice" (presentation, California Academic and Research Libraries Conference, Redwood City, CA, April 13–15, 2018) http://conf2018.carl-acrl.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/carl2018proceeding_acosta_engage_changeisgonna.docx.

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