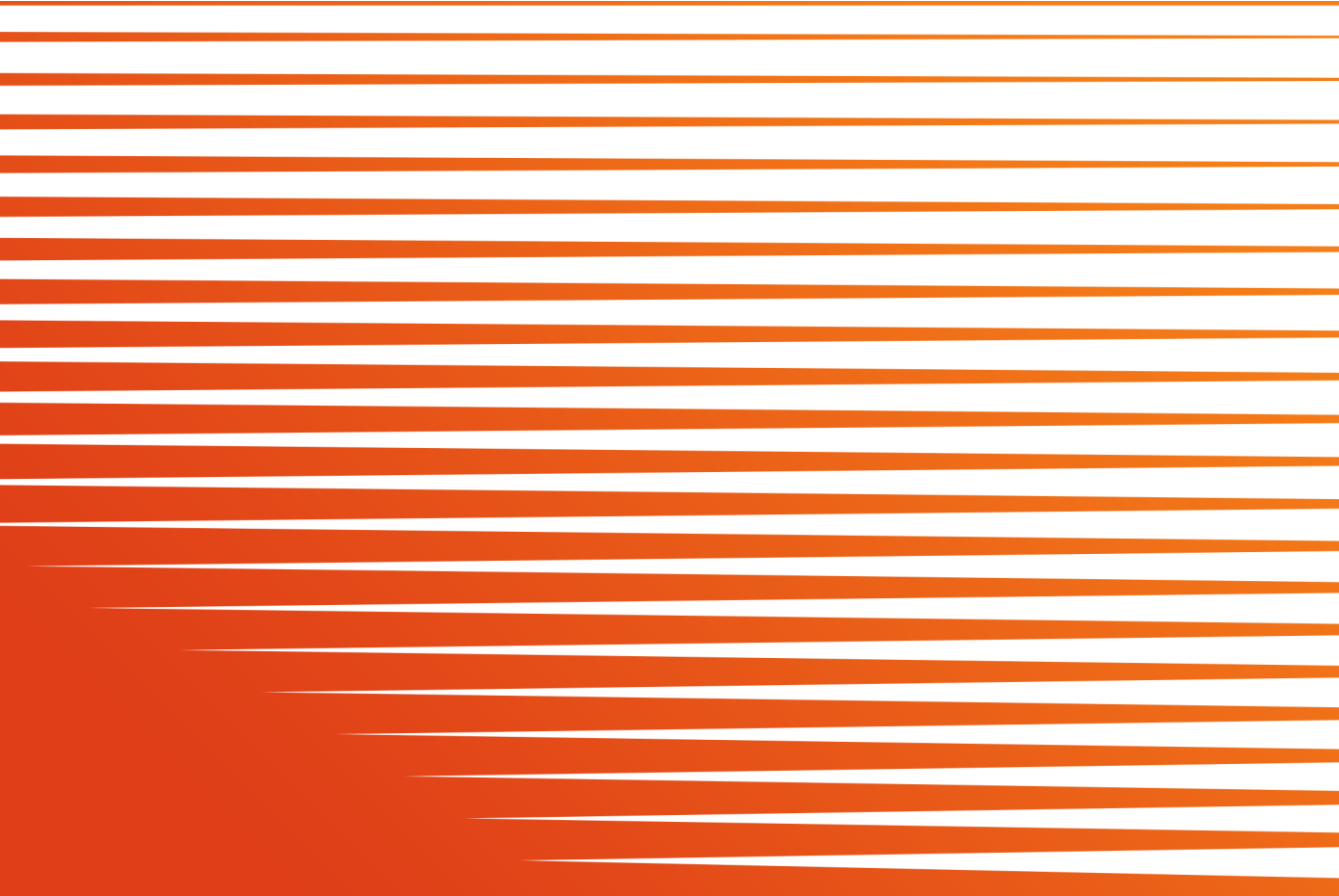


Changing the Racial Demographics of Librarians

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Librarianship has a racial diversity representation problem. Black, Indigenous, and people of color have been underrepresented in the field for decades, and despite the momentum and initiatives in support of diversifying the profession, the numbers appear to not have changed meaningfully. The data tell a consistent and compelling story. The library profession remains overwhelmingly white despite our efforts and interventions. Part of the problem stems from the fact that demographic information about the profession is not measured and reported in a consistent manner. What then would it actually take to increase the racial diversity of the field?

That is the question at the heart of “By Any Measure: The Racial Demographics of Librarians.”¹ In it, Ioana Hulbert and I begin by chronicling the complexities of trying to establish a demographic baseline for librarianship as a field, in the context of working with a fragmented demographic data landscape. In our research, we quickly found all the datasets we worked with differ ever so slightly in terms of the years they span, the way they operationalize different race, ethnicity, and even citizenship statuses. Furthermore, they have to make estimates of the total population based on very small samples of individuals. By any metric—or measure—painting a full picture of the diversity of the field is methodologically complex, in the absence of concerted efforts to track this type of data.

Within these limitations, in the brief, we use four different starting data points for the current demographic makeup of the profession, as well as data on the diversity of MLS graduates from ALA-accredited institutions, in order to project what the diversity of the field will look like in 2033, and what it would take to increase the diversity of the field to 25 percent BIPOC. While librarianship is currently estimated to be 86-88 percent white, by 2033, this number is predicted to fall to roughly 83 percent at the current rate of demographic turnover. We then explored what it would actually take to bring that percentage of BIPOC librarians to 25 percent, instead of 17 percent. From the four different starting data points, we built four different models with this end goal, finding that we would need to graduate anywhere from 500 to 1,100 additional BIPOC librarians per year, for the next ten years, in order to achieve this 25 percent goal.

Changing the numbers

Isabel Espinal, April M. Hathcock, and Maria Rios have proposed a post-baccalaureate fellowship model in which libraries incentivize staff to pursue the MLS degree. In this model the library would pay for some of its underrepresented non-librarian staff to obtain the MLS while on the job: “Libraries themselves would bear the costs by allocating funds for the program in their budgets, cutting from other areas of the budget as needed or using savings from retirements as available.”² The Espinal, Hathcock and Rios proposal is compelling. At its fullest

¹ Curtis L. Kendrick and Ioana G. Hulbert, “By Any Measure: The Racial Demographics of Librarians,” *Ithaka S+R*, 18 April 2023, <https://sr.ithaka.org/publications/by-any-measure/>. Note: Curtis L. Kendrick is a member of ITHAKA's board of trustees.

² Isabel Espinal, April M. Hathcock, and Maria Rios, “Dewhiting Librarianship: A Policy Proposal for Libraries” in *Knowledge Justice: Disrupting Library and Information Studies through Critical Race Theory*, eds. Sofia Y. Leung and Jorge R. Lopez-McKnight, The MIT Press, 2021, p. 234.

implementation they suggest that if the estimated 1,770 libraries were to establish their proposed fellowships there would be an increase of 3,478 new librarians of color per year.³

Absent intervention at a scale such as that proposed by Espinal, Hathcock and Rios, the probability of graduating an additional 500 - 1,100 librarians of color a year for the next 10 years is low. Professional interventions to aid in BIPOC recruitment and retention combined would not approach this. It is clear that the extent of our solutions does not scale to the magnitude of the problem. Despite decades of good intentions and interventions, we are not on a path to meaningful acceleration in the number of librarians of color relative to their white peers. This recognition is not a call to stop any of the programs currently planned or in place, rather a reality check to advocate for new approaches to a perennial problem.

So, what steps *has* the profession undertaken? Some institutions have begun conducting anti-racism audits, such as the one managed by Ithaka S+R for Binghamton University and the University of Delaware.⁴ Ithaka S+R audited many of the human resources functions, conducted a climate study for the two organizations, and provided recommendations for modifications to our recruitment and retention strategies. Based on findings from the audit Binghamton University Libraries implemented a more robust communication strategy with candidates ahead of interviews. More points of contact were provided to introduce them to the area and for them to learn about the university and surrounding area. On the faculty side, faculty not on the search committee no longer review and evaluate the applicant's CV and cover letter ahead of bringing in the candidates selected by the search committee. Feedback forms were revised to minimize bias in the responses. Search committees are asked to design candidate evaluation rubrics, also intended to minimize bias. Job ads now include minimum pay scales and fewer "required" elements, such as requiring X years of service or experience. For all jobs, the following requirement has been added: "Demonstrated commitment to promoting diversity and anti-racism and working to advance a workplace culture that strives to eliminate or mitigate the effects of systemic racism and bias." Ithaka S+R has also been approached about the possibility of running a survey of librarians and library workers who serve in academic/research libraries. Part of such a survey would entail measuring differences of perceptions regarding racial inequity among different demographic groups.

Many other initiatives have been developed over the years, including a host of diversity residency programs such as the first one developed at the University of Delaware in the 1980s. Other examples of initiatives in LIS programs to advance racial equity include the American Library Association's Spectrum Scholarship Program and its Diversity Research Grant.⁵ The Association of Research Libraries offers the Kaleidoscope Program and a Leadership and Career

³ Ibid., p. 233.

⁴ See Trevor A. Dawes, Jennifer K. Frederick, Curtis Kendrick, and Christine Wolff-Eisenberg, "Launching an Anti-Racism Talent Management Audit: Translating Values Into Action," *Ithaka S+R*, 2 February 2021, <https://sr.ithaka.org/blog/launching-an-anti-racism-talent-management-audit/>.

⁵ See the American Library Association's web pages on its Spectrum Scholarship Program (<https://www.ala.org/advocacy/spectrum>) and Diversity Research Grant (<https://www.ala.org/awardsgrants/diversity-research-grant>).

Development Program,⁶ and there is also the Minnesota Institute for early career librarians, among others.⁷ Since 2011, a consortium of universities offering graduate degrees in information or library science have been offering the iSchool Inclusion Institute (I3).⁸ I3 is a leadership development program targeted to undergraduate students from underrepresented populations. Hosted by the University of Texas, I3 prepares students for graduate school and careers in the information sciences.

There are now professional development programs in operation or the planning stages to advance the profession's ability to provide a more welcoming library environment for all constituencies. UCLA has received a \$1.25 million grant from the Mellon Foundation to establish the Radical Librarianship Institute,⁹ which intends to “establish and implement inclusive and socially-just librarian training and an accompanying community press.” A main focus of this initiative will be “the articulation of a radical and transformational library curriculum articulated by some of the leading librarians in the country.”¹⁰ The long-established Knowledge River Program, at the University of Arizona's iSchool, “is a national exemplar in Library & Information science education, reflecting and serving BIPOC communities through intentional teaching, research, and service the program focuses on discussion and action to improve services for BIPOC communities in libraries, archives, museums, and other information environments.”¹¹

On the east coast, Binghamton University, the City University of New York (CUNY), and Rutgers University are in the planning stages to develop an anti-racism immersion program in academic librarianship. The Binghamton, CUNY, and Rutgers program is intended as an intensive program to enhance the capacity of academic librarians to provide library services, collections, programs, and facilities to people of color on their campuses. The program will bolster participants' ability to confidently support faculty and students in their use of the library by challenging deeply held assumptions in a safe, supportive environment. Participants will come away with greater social-historical knowledge, self-knowledge, and awareness of institutional impediments that inhibit some groups of our library users from fully engaging with our library programs.

⁶ See the Association of Research Library's web pages on its Kaleidoscope Program (<https://www.arl.org/category/our-priorities/diversity-equity-inclusion/kaleidoscope-program/>) and Leadership and Career Development Program (<https://www.arl.org/category/our-priorities/diversity-equity-inclusion/leadership-and-career-development-program/>).

⁷ More information about the Minnesota Institute is available on the University of Minnesota's library website: <https://www.lib.umn.edu/about/institute>.

⁸ See the iSchool Inclusion Institute website: <https://www.i3-inclusion.org/>.

⁹ Radical Librarianship Institute, <https://www.calrbs.org/courses/radical-librarianship-institute/>.

¹⁰ UCLA School of Education and Information Studies, “Mellon Foundation Grants \$1.25 Million to Create the Radical Librarianship Institute and Community Press at UCLA,” last accessed 30 November 2022, <https://seis.ucla.edu/news/mellon-foundation-grants-1.25-million-to-create-the-radical-librarianship-institute-at-ucla>.

¹¹ University of Arizona School of Information, “Knowledge River,” last accessed 30 November 2022, <https://ischool.arizona.edu/knowledge-river>.

Removing barriers

Finally, it is necessary to reconsider the use of the MLS as a gatekeeper to the profession as it works to suppress BIPOC availability to serve in libraries. We want to diversify our ranks, but we cannot MLS our way out of our diversity problems. There are conflicting priorities—the need to diversify our libraries and our seeming inability to accept anything other than the MLS degree as the entry point for the rewards and riches of a fully realized career working in a library.

Along with this approach we might also consider which positions actually require an MLS; can there be a way for non-MLS library employees to chart a career path without having to leave our organizations or the field of librarianship? The MLS has value, but is it needed for all the positions we now require it for, or can we construct more positions that do not require it? Many years ago, Jim Neal, then vice president and university librarian at Columbia, gave a talk at an ACRL national meeting at which he advanced the concept of the feral library professional—essentially professionals with specializations other than librarianship who we accept into our domain and then inculcate with our values and our ways.¹²

Within academic libraries, for example, for people in these “non-MLS” positions, their opportunities in libraries currently are capped—it would be very tough way for someone without an MLS to be promoted up the ranks to library director or dean.¹³ And so as the careers of the people who are stars in their area develop, they leave our organizations for other fields. And they take not only their brilliance with their functional specialization with them, but also all their other creative intelligence that they would bring to the table that would diversify the thinking in our field and make us more relevant to a broader swath of the population. This suggests opening senior level management positions in libraries to those without an MLS degree. There needs to be an upward mobility path that incentivizes people to stay in the profession, to develop expertise that is valued within the library on par with those whose expertise resides within the MLS domain. Loosening our reluctance to share power with people with other professional expertise, as well as with BIPOC librarians themselves, will expand our concept of who holds sanctioned positions of power and leadership.

The system in place inhibits librarians of color from gaining access to power, and the solutions offered often place the burden for fixing the problem within the BIPOC community. In essence, we are trying to change the behavior of BIPOCs. It’s a deficit model—there’s a problem that not enough people of color are librarians, so people of color need to change and start going to library school. It’s like there’s something wrong with the BIPOC community—the community is not doing something the library world needs it to do; “how can we get more people of color to enroll in library school” may not be the right question. A more productive question might be to ask *why* BIPOC are not enrolling in library school.

¹² James G. Neal, “Raised by Wolves: The New Generation of Feral Professionals in the Academic Library,” *Proceedings of the ACRL 12th Annual Conference*, 2005, <http://hdl.handle.net/11213/17073>.

¹³ This does not refer to instances when PhD holding faculty or academic administrators may be appointed library dean.

There are at least two structural barriers inhibiting BIPOC library school attendance. The first is financial. Between pre-existing student loan debt and family obligations it is difficult for many BIPOC to consider assuming more debt only to come out of graduate school to earn \$50 - 55,000. The second structural barrier is that most of our organizational cultures are dominated by white, upper middle-class women. Expanding the definition of the profession to provide a pathway to power for more people may make library work more attractive to people who claim BIPOC identity. Let professionals climb the hierarchy just as librarians can. Keep the MLS by all means, but only use it where it is needed, and simultaneously remove any biases that keep leadership out of reach of BIPOC in libraries, regardless of their degrees and credentials.

Final thoughts

Academic libraries have an interest in recruiting a more diverse workforce not only because it is the right thing to do, but also because there is a belief that students and faculty will find the library a more welcoming place if more people of color are employed, and that this can contribute to a sense of belonging that aids retention. There is evidence that the library experience for students of color differs from that of their white peers. Ethelene Whitmire notes that “non-classroom environments, such as the academic library, can be unwelcoming for African American college students.”¹⁴

Sharon Elteto, Rose M. Jackson, and Adrienne Lim, in a study at Portland State University, found differences in the student experience of the library based on race—“students of color were much more lukewarm about whether or not they received good customer service at the reference desk when encountering a staff member of a different race or ethnicity.”¹⁵ Students indicated that at times the facial expressions of the staff don’t appear welcoming, and it was suggested that if the library had a more diverse staff others might feel more comfortable talking to them. Moreover, “students of color found the library was slightly less welcoming of them. They also felt less safe.”¹⁶

In a study of the academic library experience of Native American students, Rosalind Bucy found that “some students have expressed feelings of alienation, fear, and uncertainty when using the library, feelings that extend to their interactions with library staff as well as their use of the library space.”¹⁷ She notes further that “while browsing library collections, Native American students encounter problematic and even racist terminology and organization. Notably, Native students identified these problems while their non-Native peers did not.”¹⁸ In a literature review on Latino students and the academic library, Marta Bladek asserts that “in order to implement changes that would effectively improve the library experience for Latino students, it is crucial to

¹⁴ Ethelene Whitmire, “The Campus Racial Climate and Undergraduates Perceptions of the Academic Library,” *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 4, no. 5, July 2004, p. 363.

¹⁵ Sharon Elteto, Rose M. Jackson, and Adrienne Lim, “Is the Library a ‘Welcoming Space’?: An Urban Academic Library and Diverse Student Experiences,” *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 8, no. 3, July 2008, p.333.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.334.

¹⁷ Rosalind Bucy, “Native American Student Experience of the Academic Library,” *College & Research Libraries*, May 2022, p. 418.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

start by acknowledging that longtime services do not adequately meet their needs.”¹⁹ Finally, a 2020 study of the library experience at Duke University found that Black Duke students “perceive aspects of library spaces to be unwelcoming, specifically to Black students because they center White history.”²⁰ The Duke report found that “Black students do not feel as safe from discrimination, harassment, and emotional and physical harm as White students” when using the libraries.²¹ Some respondents indicated engaging with staff and feeling “uncomfortable about the tone of the interaction, describing them with phrases such as “talking down to,” and “reluctant to assist.”²² Ultimately, the question posed by ALA Executive Director Tracie Hall remains relevant: “We want to believe that libraries are politically neutral and colorblind. To sustain this belief, we close our eyes as we steer. But who gets run over in the process?”²³

For decades we have been ineffectively struggling with how to increase BIPOC librarian representation in our libraries, but the numbers are not changing. Moreover, representational diversity is just a first step in an ongoing journey to create library spaces and cultures that are actively anti-racist and more equitable and just. The current approaches we have adopted in our profession are not going to yield significant improvements in recruitment and retention any time soon. It is time for new approaches, and it is past time for us to engage in more rigorous tracking and reporting about our efforts.

¹⁹ Marta Bladdek, “Latino Students and the Academic Library: A Primer for Action,” *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 45, 2018, p. 55.

²⁰ Joyce Chapman, et al, “Understanding the Experiences and Needs of Black Students at Duke,” April 2020, p. 2.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 27.

²³ Tracie Hall, “Race and Place: A Personal Account of Unequal Access,” *American Libraries*, 23 April 2020, <https://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/2020/04/23/race-place-unequal-access/>.