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Closing the Gap: Supporting Equity, Diversity, & Inclusivity Plans in the Modern Library

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Equity, diversity, and inclusivity (EDI) plans and initiatives are at the forefront of many library's strategic planning (Mallon, 2019). Efforts, big or small, such as mandatory all-staff EDI training sessions (DGPL, 2021), EDI focused patron programming, or simply promoting the local library as a place of opportunity for all (ALA, 2019), demonstrate the American Library Association (ALA)'s Core Values in practice (ALA, 2006). In fact, Diversity is one of eight key action areas that are used as guiding principles for investment of energies and resources (ALA, 2007). These key action areas represent priorities and clear focuses within the ALA's own strategic plan (ALA, 2007), which serves to outline the organization's long term goals and high-level outcomes (Hirsh, 2022). The ALA has historically promoted themselves as supporters, allies, and anti-racists, playing an important role in many libraries' strategic plans and philosophies. But, despite libraries being regarded as the 'most inclusive' institutions in the United States (Jaeger, 2018), there appears to be internal and external gaps in truly achieving these EDI goals. It is necessary to further explore where these gaps are and propose solutions to ensure clearer action is being taken to support and highlight these strategies.

Defining the Terminology

It is important to define and align terms to ensure there is a consistent language being used, therefore allowing for consistent goals (Kendi, 2019). It is necessary to note the definitions and insights provided by Ibram X. Kendi in *How to be an Anti-Racist* (2019) do not directly contextualize themselves in EDI planning and documentation. However, Kendi lays relevant and philosophical-based groundwork that allows EDI focused documents and strategies to develop with the right intentions. For example, defining terms such as "antiracist" and "space antiracism"

are relevant towards strengthening equity, diversity, and inclusivity in the library (Kendi, 2019, pg. 24 & 166). An antiracist is defined as "One who is expressing the idea that racial groups are equals and none needs developing, and is supporting policy that reduces racial inequity," (Kendi, 2019, pg. 24). Additionally, space anti-racism is defined as "a powerful collection of antiracist policies that lead to racial equity between integrated and protected racialized spaces, which are substantiated by antiracist ideas about racialized spaces," (Kendi, 2019, pg. 166). These terms, and outlining these terms in this manner are important for this topic because it sets the tone for the type of thinking that is required to respectfully execute EDI initiatives. Indeed, "the only way to undo racism is to consistently identify and describe it – and then dismantle it," (Kendi, 2019, pg. 9). Likewise, the importance of responding to issues relating to sex, gender, accessibility etc. within libraries can be thought of in the same lens.

The ALA emphasizes the importance of defining these terms and placing them into relevant context. In fact, their *Strategic Directions* document begins with outlining definitions (ALA, 2017). However, such language needs to be developed into the vocabulary of a strategic plan to fully contribute towards liberation (B.3 Diversity (Old Number 60), 2010). As current social climates change, definitions and terminology should continue to evolve and be utilized to further bridge any discrepancies among EDI initiatives.

Locating EDI Initiatives

Attention should be made to where and how terms relating to EDI appear within a library's strategic plan, and/or separate EDI documents. Oftentimes, it is formatted as a commitment for the community, and is part of a library's mission and vision statements. Indeed, equity, diversity, and inclusivity, are founding principles originally adopted in the 1939 ALA Bill of Rights (Lee, 2022, pg. 324). These philosophies have trickled down in many libraries,

specifically academic settings, and are often depicted in the mission and vision statements of the strategic plan (Edwards, 2015). "[A] mission statement is a statement of purpose, a vision statement is a vivid image of the future you seek to create, and a values statement outlines your organization's guiding concepts and beliefs," (Hirsh, 2022, pg. 259). These definitions for the mission, vision, and values statements are some of the most succinct and shared in library science (Step 3: Mission, Vision, Values, 2015, pg. 77). Created through input from stakeholders and the community, a strategic plan allows an organization to achieve success by providing a framework for identifying projects, programs, and activities that are consistent with the core mission or vision (Hirsh, 2022). However, special attention should be given to *how and if* this commitment is promised for patrons and staff.

It is important to distinguish how EDI initiatives look for employees compared to patrons, and the complexity of achieving both individually. Indeed, EDI initiatives are usually written as commitments for patrons within a library's mission and vision statements. For example, one particularly well written and modern mission statement reads:

> *"Evanston Public Library aims to be the heart of our diverse community by promoting the development of independent, self-confident and literate citizens, and providing equitable access to cultural, intellectual, technological, and information resources" (EPL, 2022).*

Providing "equitable access" to resources is a goal of the Evanston Public Library (EPL), and many other libraries. It is embedded within this mission statement, but other times these objectives may be located elsewhere. For example, the EPL has a separate Equity Statement containing more concrete commitments for patrons such as to "increase non-English-language

events to better reflect the languages spoken in the Evanston community," (EPL, 2022). However, it is rare to find EDI goals for staff within the strategic plan. For example, even though diversity in the workplace is emphasized as a goal by the *ALA B.3 Diversity (Old Number 60)* document (2010), it does not come up in the EPL's Strategic Plan statement.

In other words, EDI goals for staff and patrons may share holistic values, but where a library discloses these commitments and promises seems to vary. Despite efforts, it is argued that many libraries have "fallen short" of achieving these goals (Mallon, 2019). Analyzing assumptions within library and information science literature, it is explored how libraries have missed the mark on achieving effective EDI. However, it also explored how continued adaptation of EDI can be the goal of all modernized libraries, and should be appropriately outlined in their strategic plans.

The Gaps and Existing Solutions

Library strategic plans and EDI statements continue to have inconsistent gaps in what is promised and what is put into action. Statements are obsolete without physical demonstration - EDI initiatives are based on outcomes showcased in a community setting. Abundantly, outcomes are not matching the intentions of their EDI initiatives. Libraries are not "failing" to meet these goals - there have been many well-intended efforts attempted to battle these gaps. For years, libraries have attempted to "bridge" these gaps and mend their own strategic plan flaws.

Gap #1: Workplace Diversity:

The *ALA B.3 Diversity (Old Number 60)* document (2010) emphasizes the importance of workplace diversity, yet 83% percent of librarians identify as white (Library Professionals: Facts & Figures 2020 Fact Sheet, 2020); unconsciously, this contributes to increasing the boundaries

and deficiencies from cultural differences. Despite being defined as well-rounded and culturally conscious institutions, the library workplace has continuously struggled with diversity well into the twenty-first century.

Another example of a failure to achieve workplace diversity lies in who focuses on the recruitment and retention of non-white library professionals. Despite the intentions, in an article aimed at offering professional guidance to aspiring librarians, all interviewed hiring agents were white (Week, 2022). This fails to provide assistance or appropriate representation for potential non-white identifying applicants. Non-white identifying individuals have few resources for librarians to use as role models within the field. Lastly, the lack of awareness or identification of this issue seems to be lacking at the library level. The ALA may recognize this issue, but workplace diversity, or at least a distinction from patron/staff diversity initiatives seem to be lacking in individual library's EDI statements.

Existing Solutions #1: Workplace Diversity

It is clear that the ALA's promise for workplace diversity has not been fulfilled. "Diversifying the workplace" with inclusive recruitment and retention practices should be evaluated for the level to which minority individuals have felt welcomed and safe. This means asking a more diversely identifying body of candidates, managers, and leaders to outline and implement a recruitment process that adheres to racial, cultural, and socioeconomic differences. In a white-dominanted professional field, bridging the gap between the majority and minority population is a feat easier said than done. Library discourse now examines methodology and approaches outside of the field for more diverse recruitment, retention, and inclusivity (Foy, 2021). Contributing to this gap in workforce recruitment and lack of inclusive retention is the consistency of finding white-identifying individuals as managers and library professionals. These

recruitment and retention practices are misrepresentative and unrepresentative for onboarding individuals from the minority population.

Gap #2: An Inclusive Resource Environment

Despite the ALA promising to "[P]rovide safe, respectful space for diverse voices and perspective," as a goal in their own EDI strategic direction (ALA, 2017) and being proactive against hateful conduct (ALA, 2022), library catalogs still continue to use non-inclusive and hurtful Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH) for items in their catalog (Deng and Davidian, 2021; Deng & Slutskaya, 2022). These subject headings organize and classify resources into discrete topics such as "gender non-conforming people," for example, instead of "non-binary people" (Cataloging Lab, n.d.). While these reductive terms have been changed, many continue to infringe on patrons' identities because the Library of Congress (LC) perpetuates such item classification and slows down bureaucratic item modification (Dartmouth Library, 2019). It is simplistic to assign fault to a specific library or group of libraries, but it is the Library of Congress that continues this "trickle down" effect of classification that misaligns with the ALA's EDI ideologies. This results in libraries with organizations and collections of items that are unable to meet expectations created by their EDI goals because they have to organize them by the reductive LC term.

Existing Solutions #2: An Inclusive Resource Environment:

Many cataloging and collection related EDI problems are a result of a work's subject heading - which is not at the immediate fault of an individual library. Diversity audit and collection analysis, supplying alternative and/or local subject headings, providing multilingual access points, and adding local notes to support diverse authors in collections are a few of the

current practices in place (Deng & Slutskaya, 2022). However, these practices do not fix the problem entirely. The LC should continue to consider the definitions and philosophies of Ibram X. Kendi and the ALA. The LC fails to embody these philosophies by not reacting in a timely action to the non-inclusive terminology used in their subject headings. It is disappointing that subjects come from the Library of Congress and can be affected by "politics tak[ing] precedence and progress com[ing] slowly" (Deng and Davidian, 2021). This non-inclusive organization of resources will continue to happen until the LC can better collaborate and align their values with the ALA.

Gap #3: Programming

Despite the purpose statement for the Downers Grove Public Library (DGPL) being "a place for everyone to discover, grow, play and learn" (DGPL, 2020), it is undeniable that some programming is not accepted by patrons based on political, social, or religious beliefs. At the DGPL, massive backlash was received after a program entitled "Drag-Queen Bingo," geared towards younger patrons, caused uproar in the community and was canceled before taking place (DGPL, 2022). Violent threats and uproar led to the cancellation of an event that would have effectively fulfilled EDI standards, putting a pause on the continuation of an effective strategic plan and exposing the true values of the community. In this case, it is not the fault of the library for not offering an equal distribution of inclusive events, but rather the community itself for prohibiting the event from taking place. While this can differ depending on the patron community, it further confirms the difficulty in creating a strategic plan with EDI initiatives that *every* patron finds appropriate. This is a strategic plan gap that would have to be specified and individualized per each community, and may change depending on the socio-political era.

Existing Solutions #3: Programming:

Unlike the previous two gaps, exact solutions to this problem faced by the DGPL are very difficult to propose. Libraries across the globe experience the same bouts of discrimination and diversity limitations as the Downers Grove Public Library. A strategic plan is not only the framework the library uses to help meet the needs of the community, but is also the guide towards equality and equity in the building as well. Libraries need to turn their focus towards more consistent and modernized community rollout. Community rollout is an important part of the strategic plan process because it provides an opportunity for everyone, not just management, to assess the contents of the strategic plan (Hirsh, 2022). A survey sent to the Downers Grove community explaining the purpose of a library's strategic plan, requesting ideas and opinions, and allowing for further discussion that would best represent the community is a starting point. The voices of the community need to be heard so the library's programming and actions are not only validated, but representative of the town. After that, events like this will not be as shocking after demonstrating a need for them in the community. There is strength behind an effective strategic plan and its potentiality in stimulating community change (Thompson et. al., 2008). Rather than simply meeting the needs of the community, Downers Grove could benefit from re-emphasizing the purpose of the library establishment as a place for all, and a place for change.

Where to Look: The Strategic Plan and EDI Statements

In many ways, solutions come back to where they were originally promised: a library's strategic plan or EDI statements. Libraries should begin by ensuring the definitions and applications of EDI terminology within these documents are not only agreed upon, but also "stable and consistent," as Kendi would suggest. (How to Be an Anti-Racist, 2019, pg. 17). There needs to be a re-emphasis on the "evolving" nature of these words, according to the ALA.

Strategic plans should be considered "living documents" that adhere and develop to the current climate a library resides in, in order to remain truly relevant (Hirsh, 2022, pg. 267). Additionally, libraries need to re-emphasize the importance of diversifying their stakeholders to avoid individual misrepresentation or underrepresentation in their strategic plan. The planning process and evaluation should include residents who may traditionally lack power, as well as those in a position to effect needed changes such as community leaders (Thompson et. al., 2008). Starting here, perhaps future EDI implementations can be more successful.

Indeed, there are many advantages to developing a stand-alone EDI strategic plan instead of "simply incorporating diversity into a general strategic plan" (Edwards, 2015, pg. 1). Many EDI promises were actually revealed in these types of documents as opposed to the strategic plan. Diligent and consistent assessments need to be conducted to evaluate a library's EDI outcomes separately, which will reveal the gaps and recognize areas for improvement. One last powerful solution to bettering these EDI documents is to consider a diversity, equity, and inclusion audit. The appendix of *Implementing Excellence in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: A Handbook for Academic Libraries* (2015)*,* provides a truly useful checklist, or audit, to ensure the language of the strategic plan is stable and consistent. This checklist should be applied to other EDI documents as well. Once truly representative EDI documents have been developed, it becomes easier to figure out how to "close the gaps."

Conclusion

Library Science emphasizes the importance of achieving equity, diversity, and inclusiveness in their space and community and promoting further action to close these gaps of discrimination. These gaps in strategic plans exist as a result of inconsistent terminology, lack of minority representation in the library, and diminished support and recognition from the

community. EDI initiatives are constantly evolving and developing along with a community as political and socio-economic climates change. Likewise, the library is a place for community change, too. Understanding EDI within librarianship is but a small speck in the issue of racism, sexism, accessibility, and marginalization. Discrimination in libraries occurs consistently, even with EDI initiatives in place. In other words, there is always room to improve. There is no means to an end when it comes to library equity, diversity, and inclusivity. With more deliberate effort to acknowledge those patrons and staff that are underrepresented, the "gaps" library science discourse is documenting can begin to close.

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Additional Note:

The Downers Grove Public Library has made it known that the contents of the threat are now publicly available from the Downers Grove Police Department. There are many things to say about it, but one thing is is a disappointing reflection of where the community stands for the LGBTQIA+ identifying individuals. Review here for an unofficial posting from the mayor of Downers Grove, Bob Barnett:

https://www.facebook.com/barnettfordgmayor