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Librarian Residency Programs: A Vital Solution for Increasing Representation in Academic Libraries

By Aisha Johnson, Alexandra Brinson, Kayleah Brown, Karen Manning,
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Organizational diversity and inclusion initiatives are being developed across the world to address the lack of diverse representation in the workforce. Librarianship is no exception to this challenge, and we are often seeking innovative ways to increase representation for inclusion. Library diversity residency and fellowship programs provide additional support as a stepping-stone into a career path designed for new and early career librarians from underrepresented populations. While diversity goes beyond race, the representation of library workers from diverse cultures and communities makes a significant difference in services, collections, and the development of the profession. Diversity is an issue on which the profession has consistently struggled to get a handle, particularly over the last 15 years as the lack of racial and ethnic diversity has persisted (Department for Professional Employees, 2023; Kung et al., 2020). The American Library Association's 2017 demographic study revealed that an overwhelming number of its members were White (86.7%) while professionals identifying as Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC) were under 5% each. More recently, a general overview of the demographics in the profession was provided by the Department for Professional Employees; in 2022 they found that out of the 164,280 librarians employed in the United States, over 82% identified as White, 4.3% as Black or African American, 8.0% as Hispanic or Latino, and 5.1% as Asian-American or Pacific Islander. It is also worth highlighting that the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2021) projects

librarianship to grow by 9% over the decade of 2020–2030, making it more critical to ensure libraries are representing all populations and communities they serve. To better accommodate library users, it is essential that librarians represent the various populations and understand services that are needed and provided. The Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) curriculum connects theory with practice in librarianship, archives, museums, information systems, and technology. Residency programs are an essential tool to increase diversity for representation in the library and information science (LIS) profession.

A History of Library Residencies

Although research on library residencies heavily documents programs focused on diversifying the field, their origins can be found in post-master's employment programs from the 1940s. These programs were initially intended to recruit professionals into research and academic libraries. Many of these early programs were intentionally flexible and operated based on institutional needs, frequently evaluating the benefits of residencies. In 1980, guidelines for residency programs were drafted by John B. Berry, leading to official guidelines for postgraduate resident programs of the Association for Library and Information Science Education (Velez, et al., 2021). According to these standards, residencies are "post-degree work experience designed as an entry level program for professionals who have recently received the MLS degree from a program

accredited by the American Library Association" (Perez, 2008, as cited in Velez, 2021, p. 2). Distinct from MLIS internships, residencies are designed for those who have earned the graduate degree (Velez et al., 2021). Inspired by affirmative action, a policy intended to ensure that people of color received equal opportunities regarding education and employment, library residencies began to focus more on recruiting "minority" librarians (Boyd et al., 2017). Since this change, there have been slight improvements in field diversification, with the number of librarians of color increasing between 2014 and 2017 (Office of Research and Statistics, 2017). These numbers, though showing positive increase, illustrate a need for further work in the library field that better represents the demographic of the U.S. To make lasting changes, past residency programs have been examined to identify the characteristics of successful programs. Donaldson (2018) evaluates several former residents' experiences and determines that institutional buy-in, mentorship, and strategic planning are some of the factors that contribute to designing a residency. Similarly, Velez et al. (2021) reinforces buy-in and inclusive environments as best practices when designing and implementing a successful program.

According to Brewer (2001), the first post-master's program designed explicitly to recruit for diversity in librarianship was the Library Minority Internship Program at University of Delaware Library. Developed in 1984, this program would later be renamed the Pauline A. Young Residency Program but retained the original mission of providing professional experience opportunities to early career librarians from diverse backgrounds and marginalized communities. The University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB) would follow quickly after initiating their Minority Internship Program in 1985 (Dawson & Llamas, 2001). Much like the program at University of Delaware, the UCSB program dropped the term "minority" from the official title, renaming it the Library

Fellowship Program. These parallel changes point to a charged political climate concerning affirmative action initiatives, and the changes to program titles were considered necessary to protect the mission of diversification without risking program dissolution. Over the 30 years following these inaugural programs, a small number of other academic institutions would offer similar programs. However, there was a significant uptick in the number of recent programs in the late 2010s after the formation of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Diversity Alliance in 2016 (Donaldson, 2018).

Assessing Diversity-Orientated Residency Programs

Diversity residencies were, and continue to be, developed to address the poor recruitment and retention of librarians from diverse backgrounds, particularly racial and ethnic minorities. According to surveys, those who participate in such programs are more likely to remain in the profession, an indication that they acquired skills and valuable experience (Boyd et al., 2017). Some critics have brought into question whether residencies are an adequate solution to diversifying the field, advocating for more initiatives beyond residency programs to address poor recruitment for MLIS degree programs (McElroy & Diaz, 2015). Still, residencies are recognized as a crucial component of a larger initiative to improve representation and change the impression of librarianship that primarily welcomes White, cisgender women. One must acknowledge that a major component of the success of these initiatives is ongoing program evaluation. A great deal of scholarship notes the need to evaluate throughout and after the program, including research by Donaldson (2018) and McElroy and Diaz (2015) who propose that failure to assess whether residency programs are meeting the needs of minority librarians can have an adverse effect on retention.

Acknowledging both the positive and negative feedback from residents can help target issues inherent to a program's structure and ensures that the mission to diversify librarianship is furthered rather than hindered (Brewer, 2001; Donaldson, 2018; McElroy & Diaz, 2015). Former residents have written about their experiences in diversity programs, and it is advised to utilize such research as developing and guiding practices for residencies (Alston, 2010; Hill et al., 2022; Sekyere, 2009). Most former residents detail the residency's organization, describing their rotations and the work they completed. Overall, their assessment is often positive but still offers insight into ways that programs can be improved to better suit those involved. Commonly discussed is the need for comradery and the support of a cohort. Being in a temporary role, especially for a new professional and member of a BIPoC or marginalized community, can be stressful and having a peer or peers with a similar employment status can be helpful (Hill et al., 2022). Hiring more than one resident is often determined by funding but is mentioned as necessary in offering a more welcoming environment (Hill et al., 2022).

Unique to the resident experience is what Alston (2010) calls the "intern factor." Alston describes that in the program they were sometimes referred to as an "intern" and not a resident. This is a common mistake made by those who do not fully understand the purpose of residency programs. However, Alston emphasizes the need to treat residents as entry-level librarians and hold them accountable as professionals or colleagues. Residents must be able to participate in research, serve on committees, and produce deliverables; not simply be assigned busy work. The topic surrounding terminology appears throughout literature regarding residencies. For example, Boyd (2017) references a suggestion from a former resident to refrain from calling their program an "internship" as it made developing relationships with faculty more difficult and created a divide with their professional peers (Boyd et al., 2017). Similarly, Donaldson (2018)

highlights a survey of residents in which they express feeling that they felt "disrespected as a professional." These responses indicate that the distinction between interns and residents should be understood to design a program that will be the most beneficial to early career librarians.

Career Development

Residencies and fellowships incorporate fieldwork hosted by a library organization outside of the classroom (Sands et al., 2018). From the authors' first-hand experience, practicums are critical in preparing new and early career professionals for everyday practices, building on their confidence and contributions as scholars. Residents gain practical knowledge in all areas of library work and choose one or more specialized area of librarianship as a focus. The programs contribute to the effort in attracting, recruiting, retaining, and mentoring librarians. Although major organizations and programs create and support residency programs—such as the Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program, the American Library Association's (ALA) Spectrum Scholarship, and ACRL's Diversity Alliance/Resident Program/Fellowship—we lean on the academic, public, and school libraries to properly implement these programs in the most beneficial way that produces practical professionals.

Postgraduate specialty training offers participants a wide variety of experiences in a brief period of time (The Association of Postgraduate PA Programs, n.d.). The benefit of library residency programs is not only to provide employment opportunities at the professional level, but to also serve the greater purpose of allowing early career librarians to develop core competencies for future work. This is accomplished by supplementing the curriculum that MLIS programs offer. Although master's programs do provide emerging librarians with most of the fundamental skills of librarianship, many graduates express feeling underprepared for implementing these skills in practice

(Tavernier, 2021). Residency programs designed with this in mind are an opportunity for new librarians to apply their knowledge, gaining hands-on experience that the MLIS curriculum—especially for online degree programs—fails to provide. A key aspect of this hands-on experience is mentorship, which is a crucial component of a successful residency. The program coordinators of the Dr. Henrietta M. Smith Residency at University of South Florida, established in 1995 by the library's diversity committee, identify mentorship as the most vital component of their residents' future success (Taylor, 2005). Accordingly, Donaldson (2018) includes mentorship as one of the key factors to consider when evaluating a program's success.

An Inclusive Organizational Culture: Library Case Study

Wanting to implement a residency program is great, however, it is critical to ensure you have the proper organizational culture to welcome and embrace new and early career professionals. In general, organizational culture can be defined as the shared values, beliefs, and norms of employees who work together to fulfill the organization's vision and mission. Provance et al. (2021) highlighted the fact that people are the key factor in creating a culture of excellence. The evolution of an organization and its culture is also driven by leadership and their intentionality to create a work environment where all employees can thrive. Advances in technology, changes in user expectations, and service delivery continue to be major drivers of organizational evolution (Goetsch et al., 2017). As Donaldson (2018) and Velez et al. (2021) state, institutional buy-in and an inclusive culture heavily influence the success of a residency program. Creating a culture that is warm, welcoming, and committed to an environment that leads efforts in diversity is a journey that is never static and requires contributions from all. But at the Georgia Institute of Technology (Georgia Tech), shifting our organizational culture was a necessary challenge.

In the early 1980s, like many academic libraries, the Georgia Tech library was a traditional, passive organization. Users were expected to come to the library for limited services which were often not user-centered. Library departments were siloed, and employees kept tight reins on their work. There was little sharing of knowledge for fear that an employee's responsibilities would be weakened or even taken away. As the organization evolved into one of transparency and openness, transformation with significant movement for more collaborations and partnerships occurred, internally and externally. Under the leadership of a new dean in the early 2000s, the library began to undergo vital changes. Priorities shifted, and the library became user-centered, creating and providing exemplary services and technology. Employees became involved in the evaluation, innovation, and implementation of services, facility management, and planning. New buildings, renovations, and large-scale collaborations assisted in the needed change of organizational culture. As a result of these and other improvements, the profession began to take notice, and the library was awarded the 2007 ACRL Excellence in Libraries Award. However, the organizational culture still faced major obstacles. It took time for employees to adjust to new responsibilities and new physical environments. While library faculty welcomed sharing their knowledge and expertise through a formal residency program, the organizational culture was not healthy enough to positively influence new and early career professionals.

As with any change, there were many hurdles along the way that impeded cultural growth within the library. Often new leadership is a path to forge new beginnings. It is an opportunity for a fresh perspective and strategy. Naturally, the new library dean had to gain buy-in and trust from existing employees: all were more than happy for an open, transparent advocate as a leader. The dean wasted no time in innovating a strategic plan which invested in the library

employees and soon built a new senior leadership team that was also open, transparent, and collaborative.

The intentional environment created opportunities for the library to establish both internal and external collaborations and partnerships required to become a model teaching library willing to share expertise. Today, we are an organization where all employees are welcomed, encouraged, and given the opportunity to thrive. With such changes, the library was now prepared to create a formal resident program and welcome new and early career professionals into an environment with hopes to contribute to the issue of representation in the larger profession.

Our Library Residency Program

Libraries must foster a culture of inclusion where diversity is a fundamental value that is supported and embraced. Our library had not had the reputation nor representation that supports diverse librarians. Previous efforts were not directed to making this change toward diversity, and the opposite was occurring. New leadership was the pivotal point in changing the library's culture and addressing the lack of diversity and inclusion for our librarians. In 2019, a recently retired BIPoC librarian was rehired as a temporary program manager to create a program to help improve the diversity and culture in the library. The library's portfolio process was implemented to create a project team that would document a plan for a diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) program. After conducting research that included best practices from our peer institutions, the team produced its deliverables report that included several recommendations. The first recommendation was to create a DEI Council responsible for leading the implementation of the other approved recommendations.

One of the most important recommendations was for the library to join the ACRL Diversity

Alliance Program. The ACRL Diversity Alliance Program gained popularity as a strategy to address the need for hiring librarians from underrepresented and marginalized communities. The ACRL program was brought to the attention of library leadership as a resource that aligned with the library's strategic objectives for growth, addressed the gap in diverse librarian representation, and supported a well-intentioned resident program. Georgia Tech Library leadership's commitment to transforming the organization and providing operational excellence resulted in hiring two ACRL diversity residents and the creation of new positions focused on diversity initiatives across the library.

During the development of the residency, the hiring manager gathered leaders from various departments to discuss what would be most valuable and important for the participants. Each department discussed projects and deliverables based on each resident's desires for skill acquisition. Those discussions, among others, mapped out a residency that would be flexible enough to cater to each resident's career interests, passion, and goals. We are all familiar with ongoing projects and how necessary it is to balance a layered workload conducive to building partnerships and collaborations. We wanted to give authentic and inclusive experiences that would be expected in the field, specifically in academic libraries. Consistent areas focused on advocacy and outreach efforts, including public programming and events, the library diversity council, assessment, acquisitions, and leadership/management.

With a detailed job description including salary, the library invited new and early career librarians and archivists from BIPoC and marginalized groups to apply for the diversity residency position. The positions were designed to provide early career librarians and archivists with an opportunity for rapid professional growth while bringing new perspectives and fresh ideas to the library. The yearlong residency, with the possibility of renewal for a second year, was

developed with a six-month rotation. During the second half of the year, residents chose an area to focus their work through the end of the program. The schedule and rotation agreed upon as a collective is below.

Knowledge Exchange Rotation: January–April

- Public Services: January 9–31
- Campus Engagement and Scholarly Outreach: February 1–28
- Technical Services: March 1–17
- Archives: March 20–April 14
- Assessment and Acquisitions: April 17–28

Focus Area: May–November

- Resident A in Archives
- Resident K in Technical Services and Acquisitions

Annual Wrap Up: December

- Presentation of Resident Projects
- Reception

One goal of this program is for each resident to work both with a mentor and independently to develop, complete, and report research or creative work at a conference or as a publication. As visiting faculty, the resident will also serve on library committees and project teams and participate in professional organizations. The residency is designed for participants to benefit from formal and informal mentorship, funding, and professional development with a focus on career planning while addressing the need to increase the diversity of professionals at major research libraries. As previously discussed, ongoing evaluation is critical to ensuring the intended purpose of the program is achieved and properly and authentically executed.

Resident Experiences

During the program, resident A and resident K met weekly with the hiring manager to discuss how the program was going, various things occurring in the field, and additional skill building opportunities. Here, our two residents share their first quarter experience.

Resident A: In the Summer of 2020, I attended a virtual gathering of early career librarians. It was in a breakout meeting with a more established academic librarian that I first heard about residencies, and I began to do my own research on programs. From my casual exploration of the literature on residencies, I determined that they were great opportunities to cultivate the skills I learned in library school and make necessary connections in the field. Initially, I was nervous starting this position at the library. Coming from a public library, I felt like I had to reacclimate myself to the world of academia. I was also nervous about what I could expect as a resident in a program that was newly established. There was a lot of excitement about everything I could learn. The opportunity for developing new skills and narrowing my focus in libraries motivated my decision to accept this position, and though I had concerns, I was looking forward to the experience.

After completing the first quarter of the residency, it has been great to see the effort and planning put into this program's design. Though I and the other resident are in a unique position being the first library residents at this institution, I have not felt like anything other than an early career professional. It is obvious that prior discussions took place regarding our position as faculty members, and it has served as a great introduction to the field. Though I cannot say just yet where I will land, I am on the right track for developing the skills I need to be successful in the future. My experiences so far have also been affected by fellow library faculty who have been helpful, offering their time and expertise on many occasions. I have been invited to participate in studies, created digital learning objects (DLOs), and been included in planning library events. Each time I have been invited to participate in these projects, my personal interests have been considered and I have appreciated the flexibility in designing the work around my career goals.

As I near the end of rotations, I am grateful to work in an environment where diversity and inclusion are valued. It is refreshing to see the effort by all members of this institution to create a library that is welcoming for everyone. Additionally, I am appreciative of the opportunity for mentorship in this residency. Having more experienced librarians and archivists that I can ask for advice and partner with on projects has given me insight into the profession that I am not sure I would have received otherwise. Especially helpful in this experience so far has been setting specific goals to prioritize. Keeping track of my progress has provided good documentation and helped affirm that I am working on projects that reflect my interests. Though we have accomplished a lot in the first quarter, there is certainly more to come as far as skill acquisition and professional development.

Resident K: When I learned that the library was offering a residency for early career librarians, I knew that I had finally found the opportunity I had been looking for since earning my MLIS at the end of 2020. At the time of applying, I had been full-time staff at a different university for over six years. Academic librarianship already has a high barrier to entry, and during a global pandemic, entry level positions had all but ceased to exist. My job search was significantly limited compared to my cisgender and heterosexual peers. There were logistical concerns—relocating for a position in another state could mean risking my access to healthcare—as well as concerns about whether my safety and mental health would be protected at an unfamiliar institution. I could not take a position based solely on the institution’s willingness to hire a recent graduate. Since this residency was designed with the expressed intent to offer professional experience to librarians from underrepresented and marginalized communities, it sounded like an amazing opportunity to finally break into the profession in a safe and inclusive environment.

My interview experience was reflective of what a candidate for a permanent faculty position might expect. This was surprising and welcomed. Not only did it give me experience with the process, but it also demonstrated that the institution would take me seriously as a professional. I came into the position knowing that this was the first year that the library was offering this program, so I expected this would be a learning process for everyone. There are always going to be drawbacks to being in an inaugural position; it is impossible for anyone involved to predict whether everything will work out as intended. However, the major benefit to participating in a brand-new program is that everyone I have worked with has been so excited and eager to take part in shaping our experience. I have been impressed by how flexible and understanding my colleagues have been when managing expectations and developing projects to best fit the residency's scope. My colleagues have been consistently seeking feedback on whether the program is going well, and to me, that indicates a genuine passion for helping new library professionals thrive.

When I accepted this position, I did not know yet that there would be two of us. I found this out on my first day, and admittedly, I was relieved. It made the structure of the program feel less intimidating and I no longer had to worry about being cast out as the only temporary faculty member. This also strengthens the opportunity for shared learning and collaboration, and I believe that having more than one resident in the program is a crucial component of success—both for us and for the institution. We can offer our unique viewpoints to contribute to a more well-rounded experience for ourselves and for future residents.

These first three months, we have already rotated through four different departments. It has certainly been fast paced; at times, it can feel like a crash course. But I do feel that I have spent enough time in each area to get a top-level overview of the role each department plays in the

greater schema of the academic library. This is largely thanks to the eagerness and willingness of my colleagues to act as mentors, even after the cessation of my rotation through their respective departments. With their continued support, I have improved my confidence in my existing skills and learned new ways to apply that knowledge. A lot of professionals do not get an opportunity like this to engage in library work on a holistic scale before delving into their specialized field, and I am fortunate to have the chance to learn from so many different professionals in one place. This role has been an invaluable component of my career development because it supplements my library education with personal, hands-on experiences that online degree programs just cannot offer.

Representation Matters

While societal, organizational, political, and personnel factors remain obstacles in diversifying librarianship, resident diversity programs are a promising pathway when paved with good intentions. Such programs have been shown to have a positive impact on one's career. The enhanced professional and personal learning experience and mentorship gained in an inclusive environment through a residency provides an opportunity to diversify the profession and retain passionate people to serve all communities. However, these programs must be supported with institutional and leadership buy-in. Without support, the profession will be unable to serve all people, reduce library anxiety, and stand on a platform of representation for all.

Funding sources need to be embedded in the library's budget to ensure continuation of such programs, demonstrating a bigger commitment to countering one of the biggest obstacles in librarianship.

The development of residency programs and initiatives which promote the value of diversity, equity, and inclusion is a pure form of advocacy and outreach. These efforts, for strategic and statistical reasoning, have been injected into institutions of higher education where student populations have become more diverse. Residencies are not only beneficial to the profession, but also to the communities we serve. This is one way—an essential way—to recruit, retain, and support our goals of being an inclusive profession.

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