

DEI in Campus Libraries: Key Challenges and Opportunities



Introduction

Promoting diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) is an important part of the mission of campus libraries. It is essential to acknowledge and appreciate differences, cultivate an inclusive culture, and provide equitable literacy and access to resources.

In coordination with EBSCO Information Services, *Library Journal* recently polled academic librarians and students at higher-education institutions nationwide to gather their views on DEI initiatives at campus libraries. The results of these surveys, along with conversations with academic librarians at select institutions, reveal important insights about the state of DEI on college campuses today, key challenges standing in the way of DEI initiatives and best practices that can help guide academic librarians as they take on this important work.

Overview

“We all want to feel understood and included. Libraries are known to be welcoming environments and a place for intellectual freedom. Having a diverse collection allows patrons to feel like the library is a safe place to be, and it brings more cultural awareness to the community as a whole,” said Jennifer J. Jimenez, Reference and E-resource Librarian and Assistant Professor of Learning Resources for Del Mar College in Texas.

DEI “is how we create culture,” said Heather Parish, Library Communications and Programming Specialist for California State University, Fresno. “It’s important for our students, faculty and the broader community to see themselves reflected in our programs and collections, but also to have a window into other cultures that they might not be considering very well because of their own assumptions.”

The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) (2012) has developed professional standards around cultural awareness and diversity. These include: “Librarians and library staff shall develop collections and provide programs and services that are inclusive of the needs of all persons in the community the library serves (Standard 4).”

While ensuring a diversity of viewpoints in their collections and fostering equity and inclusion in their programming is an important aspect of an academic library’s mission, how can librarians effectively meet these goals?

What does diversity mean on today's college campuses?

Diversity references more than just race and gender identity. It also encompasses sexual orientation, age, ableism, socioeconomic, geographic, first-generation and veteran status, religion, political and cultural beliefs, life experiences and perspectives as well as other factors. For example:

According to the Center for Law and Social Policy (2017), 40% of undergraduates are 25 or older, indicating that there is a significant number of nontraditional students pursuing a college education.

In 2019, the American College Health Association (2019) found that out of a sample of 67,972 undergraduate students, 21.5% identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans, asexual, pansexual, queer, questioning, or another identity other than straight/heterosexual, showing that there is great diversity in gender identity and sexuality on college campuses.

The National Center for Education Statistics (2017), the principal statistical agency within the U.S. Department of Education, said that 19% of undergrads in 2015–2016 reported having a disability.

In a Chronicle of Higher Education survey (2011), 23% of students claimed no religious preference, about 39% listed some form of Christianity as their preference, 2.9% identified as Jewish, and preferences for several other religions ranged from 0.2 to 1.2 %.

Just over 20% of first-year students in the same survey were first-generation students, and 30.9% of students estimated family income at under \$50,000 (Chronicle, 2011).

Students in that survey described their political views as “middle of the road” (46.4%), with 27.5% describing their views as liberal, and 21.7% as conservative, showing a range of political beliefs (Chronicle, 2011).

Some institutions of higher education have responded to the increasing diversity of students, in part, by expanding their curricular offerings. Nearly two-thirds of American colleges and universities offer degree programs in ethnic/culture/international studies, according to the *Library Journal* Academic Library Diverse Collections Survey (2019).

The survey also reported that about half (54%) of the responding schools offer gender studies, while just under half (49%) offer degrees in religious studies, and disability studies are offered by 18% of survey respondents. Nearly a third (30%) of respondents, however, said their institutions do not offer any of these programs.

As these numbers show, a wide range of lived experiences and perspectives are represented on college campuses, and a range of academic library materials are needed in a variety of formats.

How well are academic libraries meeting DEI goals?

ALA's interpretation of Article I of its library bill of rights (2019) states, "Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves. Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background or views of those contributing to their creation. A diverse collection should contain content by and about a wide array of people and cultures to authentically reflect a variety of ideas, information, stories and experiences."



"As information gatherers, it's our job to make sure the collections are diverse," said Rachel Blume, Collection Development and Serials Librarian at J. Willard Marriott Library at the University of Utah. "Librarians are advocates for that access to information, and that means all information — not just the information that is easily accessible, or the voices that are the loudest or make up the largest group."

About 85% of the librarians who responded to the *Library Journal* (LJ) survey (2019) said their library serves the needs of diverse students at least "adequately," with 15% saying "very well" and 31% saying "well." On the other hand, 13% of libraries report hearing feedback from students about the need for more inclusive materials at least monthly; 3% report hearing it daily.

A separate LJ survey (2023) of students at two- and four-year colleges and universities nationwide, conducted four years later, found even more cause for optimism. Ninety-six percent of the total student sample replied "Yes" to the question, "Do you believe you are represented in the library's resources (e.g., books, database articles, media, etc.)?"

When asked if they believe all groups are represented fairly and equitably in the library's resources, 88% of the total sample said "Yes," 4% said "No" and 8% responded "Don't know." The groups with the highest "No" response were students in the Midwest (8.3%), Hispanic students (7.6%), part-time students (7.4%) and Black/African American students (7.1%).

Open-ended responses about how their library could help all students feel represented revealed opportunities for improvement and growth when promoting diverse collections and soliciting feedback from students.

“Have a suggestion box to help get the attention of student wants and needs,” one respondent advised. “Label where people can find authors and resources from [different ethnicities],” another wrote. “Labeling will allow students to easily seek different perspectives on what they study.”

A diverse library collection also requires an equitable library environment to access. And here again, the results of the student survey were largely encouraging: 91% of students said their campus library is an inclusive and welcoming space for them and others. Six percent did not agree, and 3% abstained from answering.

An open-ended question asked students to describe the changes they’ve noticed. Most mentioned that they are seeing more diversity in library staff and a generally more inclusive, welcoming feel to the library.

The vast majority of students (92%) have noticed the library promoting DEI in other ways beyond their collections, most commonly by employing a diverse staff (55%), designating safe spaces within the library (42%) and allowing for customization of the readability/look of the library website and e-resources (40%).

Over a third have noticed their library providing adjustable height work surfaces (36%) and/or sensory maps to locate accessible spaces within the library (34%). The availability of single-user or gender-neutral bathrooms was indicated by 33% of students.

Again, the survey suggested room for improvement when it comes to highlighting diverse materials; only 22% of students said they’ve noticed DEI displays in their campus library.

Key challenges for campus libraries

While the survey results and discussions with librarians pointed to significant progress in implementing DEI initiatives on campus, they also highlighted a number of key challenges.

One professor stated that he observed firsthand the impacts some of the proposed policies were having on students who were concerned that they might not be able to complete their chosen majors. He said that his faculty were concerned that research and external funding may be jeopardized, and that these issues are “diverting time and effort away from our institutional mission of research, teaching and service.”

Another librarian mentioned that the misperceptions and pushback that DEI faces show that librarians need to do a better job of engaging with all campus stakeholders, and especially critics, to explain what DEI entails and how it benefits everyone by creating a safe, inclusive campus environment where everyone feels welcome and respected.

“If we can have conversations in a way that allow for space for people to change their minds and rejoin us, that is the way forward. The rhetoric of extremism leads to increasing isolation,” offered another librarian. “If we can change this instead to a rhetoric of exploration, where we may make mistakes but we are able to acknowledge our humanness, then we can get closer to that feeling of community.”

How librarians handle the questioning and removal of materials considered inappropriate for their campus environment is also a key challenge.

In the LJ student survey, 40% of respondents said they’ve encountered library resources containing outdated, stereotyped or incorrect information about marginalized people. One-quarter of these students said they brought their discovery to the attention of library staff or faculty.

In discussions with academic librarians, it became clear that campus libraries handle the challenging of such materials in different ways. In deciding what to do, librarians try to balance sensitivity to the groups affected with the need to preserve (and accurately reflect) history.

Parish said her library at Fresno State has a good policy and process in place for this. Librarians gather information about the materials in question, and they include the student who has called those materials to their attention in the decision-making process. “We give them an overview of how we manage these materials,” she said. “Some materials do need to be weeded.”

If the librarians decide to keep a certain resource, they explain why. Sometimes the item will be put into a special collection if it’s important enough to preserve, yet still considered offensive. “We walk these groups through our process to help them understand our thinking,” Parish said — and this transparency in communicating makes a big difference.



“I think the difficulty lies in the reticence to even engage in conversation. I believe that meaningful, face-to-face dialogue is an important component of getting to a place with DEI skeptics where we can actually dispel false perceptions. It won’t work all the time, but being able to have conversations and build a pathway back to wholeness as a community is the way forward.”

Helpful Tips

A practice that has gained momentum in recent years is teaming up with an outside organization to conduct a diversity audit of a library’s collection.

However librarians choose to promote the diversity of their collections, a key to success is using multiple methods of communication.

Best practices in library diversity, equity and inclusion

1. Assemble a DEI committee.

While a growing number of institutions are hiring DEI coordinators or naming DEI leaders on campus, having multiple, diverse voices at the table when crafting DEI policies and procedures increases the chances that stakeholders will buy in and that policies will be fair and equitable for everyone.

One librarian surveyed who co-chairs a DEI council at her university, noted “The strength of our council comes from having a broad range of perspectives from both students and employees,” she said. “As co-chair, I try to empower my colleagues and create a safe space for people to share their experiences. It takes a lot of time and trust to maintain that environment — and it is continual work.”

2. Engage with the entire campus community.

Librarians need to communicate up the chain of command by making sure the president, provost and other campus leaders understand the value of DEI initiatives, as well as communicating outward to students, faculty and staff and engaging them in collection development.

Respondents to the 2019 LJ survey reported that getting faculty involved in developing inclusive collections remains a challenge. Respondents estimate that an average of only 17.5% of all faculty at their institutions collaborate with the library in their fields of study. That number strikes many librarians as low — but not surprising. “A constant battle for an academic librarian is trying to get faculty to engage,” said Blume.

As part of the solution, Blume reaches out to faculty when they’re new to the institution. She used a Listserv to solicit titles from the Pacific Islander faculty — a sizable minority on the University of Utah campus, as the state has the largest Samoan population in the country.

3. Draft a collection development statement.

A collection development statement is essential to “providing rules and guidance for creating a well-balanced collection based on user needs and the mission of the institution” (Ciszek & Young, 2010). The ACRL (2012) emphasizes that soliciting input from users (undergraduates, graduate students, faculty) is a vital part of this process (Standard 4).

An important first step in developing a plan is knowing who the library’s users — and potential users — are.

Registrars, student diversity officers, student life professionals and student success personnel can be important resources in describing who makes up the college community and who is (and is not) using resources.

The ACRL (2012) advocates professional development in cultural competency to prepare librarians to meaningfully evaluate the diversity of their collections, serve their constituents and make suggestions for collections development.

4. Partner with campus organizations.

Forging connections with campus organizations that are serving the interests of diverse and marginalized groups can help inform library collections by uncovering the needs of various groups within the college community.

“We have made partnerships across our campus,” Parish said. “We work with organizations like our Cross-Cultural and Gender Center on the continued development of a safe and welcoming environment.”

5. Use data to assess collections.

Consult diversity-related circulation and use statistics like ILL borrowing requests, OPAC keyword search terms and WorldCat collection analysis — the increasingly global reach of the WorldCat database makes it an obvious source for data mining. Check regularly to see what topics are not well represented in collections and make adjustments as needed.

A practice that has gained momentum in recent years is teaming up with an outside organization to conduct a diversity audit of a library’s collections. Jiminez recently attended a conference session about this practice and said it was an eye-opening experience.

“I would recommend that institutions go through an audit of their collections,” she said. “We don’t currently do that at Del Mar, but that’s an area we can improve on.”

6. Promote diverse materials in many ways.

A question in the 2019 LJ survey revealed the top three ways that academic libraries promote their diverse collections: through displays, faculty interaction and LibGuides.

Blume advocates using displays within the library to promote collection diversity. Whenever the University of Utah library acquires new titles, librarians set up a table, hand out candy or chips, make a poster and print out a flyer. “I also go to where the students are,” she said, adding that an effective way to reach students is to put up posters in cafeterias, sports facilities and on dorm bulletin boards.

Fresno State posts DEI Spotlights on the home page of the library's website. Del Mar College relies on old-school library displays and virtual displays using LibGuides.

However librarians promote the diversity of their collections, a key to success is using multiple methods of communicating. Student surveys can also yield insight into users who might be underserved and could benefit from targeted outreach.

7. Think beyond your collections.

There are many opportunities to reflect diversity, equity and inclusion besides a library's print and electronic resources. For example, consider the library's physical spaces and digital platforms and whether these are welcoming and inclusive of all users.

"In our physical spaces, libraries need to be open to providing a calming space for meditation or prayer, where students who have social anxiety can step away," Jiminez said. "That's something we need to look into here at Del Mar College." Within the instructional sessions that librarians lead with students, she added, "we're trying to address different learning styles by incorporating Universal Design for Learning principles into those sessions."

8. Facilitate Conversations and Engagement.

Consider conducting a Listening Tour to solicit direct feedback and hear the voices of the students and faculty. Consider gathering feedback from the two groups separately and keep the process anonymous. This exercise could be very informative and allow librarians to give recommendations on how to improve or enhance existing DEI efforts. As the Florida librarian reminded us, "Everyone has a different experience, and it's important to ask questions and listen, rather than being argumentative or defensive. Be humble and be willing to learn from others."



"DEI is constantly evolving...There's a half-life on the work we do in DEI, because the experiences of our colleagues continue to evolve, and we have to keep pace with that. We'll never be at a point where our work is done."

Conclusion

Increasing DEI awareness and sensitivity is essential to the success of academic libraries and is a goal for many academic librarians. Library professionals continue to advocate for diversity and intellectual freedom, leading to the addition of resources that address diversity in authorship, subject matter, language and accessibility.

Budgets, of course, play a role in development of collections. In the 2019 LJ survey, 27% of respondents said a higher percentage of their budgets now goes toward diverse materials than it used to, indicating that diversity is a priority. An in-depth evaluation of collections — such as through a diversity audit — can help present a case for collection development funds.

Although there are challenges in facing the pushback against DEI in certain circles, it is an essential element of academic libraries and the resources within them. DEI concepts, initiatives and programs will evolve over time, and academic librarians, like those quoted in this survey, are finding ways to meet those challenges to the benefit of their users.



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