

Hybrid Vision Panel: Progress Not Perfection: DEI Work Within Information Organizations

Dr. Kawanna Bright, Sarah Dupont, Maha Kumaran, Ilda Cardenas and Sonali Sugrim

Abstract

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) are very important to any organization, especially libraries and information organizations. However, as the initiative has gained prominence, there seems to be a lack of systematic and comprehensive approaches to expanding diversity, equity, and inclusion within organizations. This dearth of strategy often leaves the burden of diversity, equity, and inclusion on a single individual or a few individuals, particularly those who identify as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). As is common in the information field, responsibilities can seem like a never-ending list. This, coupled with a lack of organizational direction, can make it difficult to achieve progress with this initiative. Presenters Dr. Kawanna Bright, Sarah Dupont, and Maha Kumaran addressed the lack of a cohesive approach and how progress in diversity, equity, and inclusion depends on many factors, including an organization's leadership, demographics, and geographic location. The presenters discussed the importance of such work and addressed questions from the audience about their personal insights and challenges.

Keywords: diversity, equity, and inclusion, DEI, information organizations, librarians

The 37th Annual NASIG Conference was held to accommodate attendees in person and virtually. The Vision Panel: Progress Not Perfection: DEI Work Within Information was a hybrid, synchronous session moderated by Ilda Cardenas, the Electronic Resources Librarian at California State University at Fullerton. One of this session's panelists was Dr. Kawanna Bright, an Assistant Professor of Library Science at East Carolina University. Dr. Bright earned her Ph.D. from the University of Denver in 2018 in research methods and statistics. Prior to her doctorate, Dr. Bright was an Academic Librarian with over a decade of experience. Dr. Bright was joined by Sarah Dupont and Maha Kumaran.* Sarah Dupont is the Head Librarian of the Xwi7xwa Library at the University of British Columbia. Sarah's role includes strategic work on Indigenous initiatives. Maha Kumaran is the Education Liaison Librarian at the University of Saskatchewan, where she provides reference and instructional services to the College of Education. Maha's research focuses on diversity in librarianship, and she is the co-founder and co-chair of the Visible Minority Librarians of Canada Network.

Moderator Ilda Cardenas had prepared questions for the panelists. Attendees were encouraged to submit questions before the session and after the discussion as part of a Questions and Answers segment. For each question, the panelists shared their experiences and recommendations with the audience.

The discussions included a broad range of topics from annual and salary reviews, onboarding, safe work environments, and burnout. One of the main themes of these discussions was the lack of consideration given to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) librarians. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives often are not rewarded in annual reviews, performance reviews and salary reviews. When DEI standards are considered, they do not necessarily shift the status quo. The panelists noted the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in the workplace. They emphasized the importance of organizations embarking on these initiatives, and those that already do should focus on the following:

* Correction notice: at the time of publication, Maha Kumaran's name was misspelled in this sentence. As of Dec. 2024, this has now been corrected.

1. How is the DEI committee/taskforce structured?
2. What can and should change?
3. How should those changes happen?

From there, the conversation touched on why BIPOC librarians are often tasked with making their organizations more diverse, equitable, and inclusive. Frequently, librarians of color are not asked if they want to be a part of these initiatives but they are expected to or assumed that they would be willing to engage. This lack of consideration is rooted in a lack of respect shown toward librarians of color. It is very difficult for a librarian of color to work in a profession such as library and information science, as most librarians are not people of color and do not consider how their practices affect librarians of color. The panelists noted that a lack of respect is often demonstrated when others refuse to address librarians of color by their correct names, titles, and pronouns. Non-anglicized names are mispronounced. Librarians of color may be asked to provide an anglicized nickname, and when they do not, their names continue to be mispronounced. In instances where there are one or few librarians of color, especially when those few may be of the same race, those librarians are mistaken for each other. Dr. Bright spoke of her experiences in which colleagues have refused to acknowledge that she holds a doctorate and address her by her title. Dr. Bright also noted that she has been mistaken for other colleagues who “looked” like her.

Librarians of color are often disrespected, and not much seems to have changed. The panelists did conclude that it is difficult to address such situations and speak out against such disrespect, especially if those who engage in such behavior are in positions of power. The panelists asserted that ally ship is important and that if someone witnesses a colleague addressed by an incorrect name or title, they should speak up. The bottom line is that everyone should try to address others by their names of choice.

Inequitable and biased actions should not be prolonged, as they can take a toll on the targeted person. All three panelists shared the

impact of inequitable actions against them. They noted that burnout can occur, and if not completely, there is a slowing down of work. This makes it difficult for BIPOC librarians to assume a healthy balance in their personal and professional lives. This exhaustion is emotional labor.

Dr. Bright discussed a sense of obligation and willingness to contribute to DEI initiatives. Dr. Bright has participated in 51 presentations since the COVID-19 pandemic. She noted the toll this has taken on her both as a professional and in a personal capacity. Inequitable and biased actions are tiring and can be especially frustrating when change is difficult to come by or takes a long time. As such, many BIPOC librarians have left the library and information science field in search of more equitable and less stressful options. Not only is it not unheard of that these inequities occur in the profession, it is common practice. Librarians of color endure a lot, and something must change.

Librarians are often overworked, performing duties in multiple areas, many beyond the core responsibilities of the jobs they were hired for or are supposed to do. Tenure expectations add to the burden for many librarians, as the need to publish can be time-consuming. Often in situations where inequities exist, librarians—especially librarians of color—do not feel safe to speak up and address these issues. The panelists explained that librarians of color often fear losing their jobs. They emphasized the need for everyone to feel safe and have a purpose at work. Dr. Bright, Ms. Dupont, and Ms. Kumaran stressed the importance of change and its urgency. Change should not wait. Organizations should not sidestep DEI initiatives. Tenure does not solve the issue and can result in bullying. Allies are needed. The panelists considered if change can be realized without senior management's input, and agreed that they must participate in this paradigm shift.

Finally, the discussion veered towards the lack of onboarding practices for librarians and the challenges library professionals faced during the pandemic. Zoom and the virtual environment did pose another obstacle for library professionals. The pandemic shed light on the hierarchies that exist within libraries. For example, staff had to open the

libraries and work the desk when many librarians were still allowed to work from home. Hierarchies do not facilitate cooperation. If there is little cooperation, it will be difficult to enact comprehensive change. Libraries need to be more diverse, equitable, and inclusive for all their workers. Organizations and senior management must strive to make their work environment safer, more diverse, equitable, and inclusive for all peoples.

Contributor Notes

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