

Diversity Evaluation and Vendor Communication: The Effect on a Collection and Vendor Relationships

Elizabeth S. Speer

Abstract

Recent events and efforts to embody The University of North Texas Health Science Center's (UNTHSC) code of culture have necessitated the evaluation of policies and collections regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). In our assessment of resources, we found that few electronic resources provided medical-quality images with multiple skin tones. The inclusion of culturally inclusive images, especially dermatologic in nature, is imperative for the education of doctors who will treat patients of diverse backgrounds. Recognizing bias and a lack of relevant materials in our collection, UNTHSC drafted documentation reflecting DEI as a purchasing impact factor. We shared the documentation with vendors and explained the decision. This session discussed the process, conversations, and results of our communication with vendors regarding our collection and HSC and vendor relationships.

Keywords: diversity, equity, inclusion, evaluation, vendor communication, electronic resources

Driving forces behind the project

In June 2020, The University of North Texas (UNT) system issued responses to senseless violence and systematic racism which had become evident across the United States. An evaluation of campus culture over several years meant that The University of North Texas Health Science Center (HSC) shifted towards a more inclusive environment for students, staff, and faculty. Further, on June 12, 2020, Provost Charles Taylor issued a statement entitled *Together We Stand as ONE University* that clarified how UNTHSC would address national underlying conditions which affect diversity initiatives and racism across campus.¹ A strong focus on campus values, which includes respect and collaboration, would guide library staff moving forward. And finally, the known lack of diversity across medical literature was seen as an issue that perpetuated racist ideas across medical education. These events, cultural shifts, communications, and known issues would be the driving forces behind Gibson D. Lewis Health Science Library at HSC's collection diversity evaluation project.

In his message to HSC, Provost Taylor identified three near-term actions: assistance, dialogue, and awareness. While the statement did not specifically mention or point to library resources, library staff believed this was a call to action across the campus and that every department should find a way forward to support diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Assistance was proposed as encouragement to access and increase awareness of available resources. Dialogue focused on what we could do better or differently moving forward and how we could communicate those needs. And awareness was meant to identify additional opportunities. Lewis Library took these actions and focused them on collection development through a lens of diversity.

Library staff knew there was a lack of diversity throughout the collection, that medical images were particularly problematic, and that medical literature as a whole is traditionally homogenous. DEI was also not a documented purchasing factor, nor was it discussed with faculty when purchasing requests were made. Communication, both

internally with library staff and university faculty as well as externally with library vendor representatives, was lacking in discussions about the diversity needs of the library and the collection.

Project objectives

Elizabeth Speer was tasked with the collection diversity evaluation project and established three objectives: determine HSC's community to establish diversity standards for the collection, evaluate the collection for areas lacking diversity, and establish best practices for HSC and vendor communication.

Determining HSC's community ended up being the easiest part of the project. Ms. Speer was able to utilize university-created marketing and demographic information to gather data about internal communities. Information about the extended external community was pulled from the university's subscription to PolicyMap, a geographical data mapping database. The library knew the overall internal population served by HSC is predominantly white, with 54 percent of staff, 61 percent of faculty, and 39 percent of all students self-identifying as white. However, the library was unaware that the majority of all groups identify as female. The age range of the student population is between 20–73, which was a much broader range than expected. And over the last two years, the student population identifying as black or African American has increased by 34 percent, and the number of Hispanic or Latino students has grown by 12 percent. The university also has significant Asian and international student populations.² External population demographics were generated by entering search criteria into PolicyMap's interface. These search parameters provided data showing some of HSC's internal groups being predominantly white. However, almost two-thirds of the extended areas the university serves identifies as Hispanic, between 25–30 percent are over the age of fifty-five, and a quarter are under the age of eighteen.³ There were additional internal areas of research that also needed to be considered. These areas

include the Texas Center for Health Disparities, which treats HIV, cancer, stroke, and women in underserved and low-income communities in Texas. The university also has the Center for Health Aging and the Institute for Translational Research, which focuses on the aging process and Alzheimer's. And finally, there is the outreach to rural communities and the increased interlibrary loan (ILL) requests for medical information on transgender health. All of this data provided a starting point for evaluating the collection as the library wanted to ensure that the populations regularly served by HSC were represented within the library's digital and print collections.

The second objective proved to be more problematic in that the collection evaluation began in the summer of 2020 while the university and library was still attempting to address students' access to resources amid COVID-19 precautions. Also, the library was migrating to a new integrated library system, which meant the evaluation had to be postponed until the migration of all resources was complete, shortening the library's timeline considerably. Evaluation of the collection began with what we refer to as visual databases, point-of-care tools that are extremely image heavy. Ms. Speer and a single library technician spot checked these databases to evaluate the availability of multiple skin tones and age ranges. Individual subscription titles were evaluated next for areas of diversity since these titles are selected individually and are not part of large package deals. Package databases were assessed based on title lists provided by the vendors. A list of relevant search terms was created, and the discovery layer was searched extensively to get an idea of current book content and areas where content was limited or absent. Finally, a comprehensive list of current library vendors was created to facilitate conversations on the library's collection evaluation findings.

The third objective, to create best practices for the library, was a culmination of learned information, encountered roadblocks, and multiple discussions with library administration. These newly-established best practices will be discussed in the Solutions section of this paper.

Roadblocks

Defining “diversity” was the first roadblock. Different groups across campus had different definitions based on their perceptions of what diversity was and how it affected their area. The library definition had to vary based on collection goals, defined community, and research needs. Ultimately, library staff decided to use “the practice or quality of including or involving people from a range of different social and ethnic backgrounds and of different genders, religions, etc.” as our definition.⁴ Library staff felt this generalized but relatively inclusive definition of diversity allowed us to focus not only on race but on other equally as important factors when speaking about diversity as it affects the library collection.

The lack of relevant metadata within collection records was also a significant issue when evaluating the library collection for diversity. Multiple e-books that should have appeared in searches did not because chapter titles were not included in the metadata. The same is true for title evaluations, as titles of journals often do not clearly define the content of the journal.

While a small staff of two was tasked with the evaluation, the majority of the work was completed by the electronic resources & acquisitions librarian over the course of a few months. The volume of the collection, while small in comparison to large research university libraries, was still a significant roadblock to overcome for a single person. Over 25,000 journal titles, 500,000 active links, and many shared large packages meant there had to be clear parameters in place in order to complete the evaluation.

Finally, a known lack of communication across the HSC campus and with vendors about the need to diversify the collection and add diversity as a purchasing factor had to be evaluated and overcome. Vendor representatives could not be expected to know that this was an area of importance to the library and the collection if they had not been informed. Library staff were not including diversity in their evaluations of potential resources, and policies did not reflect this need.

Solutions

Solutions to the roadblocks and collection issues needed to be practical and easily implementable. First, the library decided to focus on what it could control. Large package contents were often determined by publishers and could not be altered. Therefore, the focus moving forward would be on individual journal subscriptions, who the library chose to do business and enter into new agreements with, and new purchases.

Second, library staff would start adjusting from where the collection currently stood. No items would be removed from the library collections based on new criteria and areas of focus. These selections were made for a reason, and there was no point in decreasing access to information that was relevant and already owned by the library. Also, the library did not attempt to break or alter existing purchasing contracts but would adjust language and content during the next contract negotiations.

Third, because of the decision to implement the new collection development criteria from the fall of 2020 forward, best practices needed to be established. These new standards included altering the review process for all purchases to include a section where DEI was included. Online purchase request forms will include a section about diversity once the library's new website launches in the fall of 2022. In the interim, library staff followed up with faculty about diversity requirements and researched any requests submitted. Library purchasing and collection development policies were altered to include DEI as a selection criterion for new resources. This inclusion does not exclude the purchase of materials but does guarantee that diversity of materials is discussed and considered when making decisions. Library staff began actively seeking out new resources that would broaden the collection's diversity level. Finally, new communication forms and standards were set to streamline information being provided to vendor representatives and HSC faculty and staff.

Vendor communication

Communication with vendors had to change in order to successfully articulate the new needs of HSC. A multi-part communication strategy was put into place. This strategy would be rolled out slowly over the course of two years. Vendors were divided into categories based on the services that they provided to the library. Those who provided image-heavy databases, had large contracts in place, or were new contracts would be part of the first year's communication initiatives, with all other vendors targeted the following year.

The first step of the new communication process would be a written letter in which the new expectations for vendors would be clearly established (Appendix A). This letter was written by Elizabeth Speer and would become the basis for opening dialog about the diversity needs of HSC and pave a path moving forward. In the letter, expectations to include "a broader spectrum of materials which clearly demonstrate the importance of including people of all races, gender identities, socioeconomic backgrounds, and cultures" are stated.⁵

New meeting standards were also put into place. After receiving the official letter of expectations, vendor representatives were required to meet with Ms. Speer to discuss current subscriptions and any additional products which might serve to diversify the library collection. These thirty-minute sessions helped to build a rapport with vendor representatives and allowed both HSC and companies that provide library services to discuss diversity expectations without the pressure of negotiations or purchasing needs. It allowed library staff and vendors to freely communicate areas of concern and places where positive change was either already happening or on strategic roadmaps. Conversations during these short meetings built upon existing personal relationships with e-resources staff and vendor representatives, allowing for a more open and honest exchange of ideas.

Quarterly meetings became standard for all vendors who do business with HSC. These meetings are scheduled for fifteen to thirty minutes as a way for vendors to provide updates on their company

initiatives and products and for HSC staff to communicate any new areas of collection focus. All new vendor representatives are required to have an initial longer meeting where they are provided a copy of the letter sent to the previous representative and may ask questions and discuss how HSC actively communicates with vendors.

Vendor responses to the altered communication standards were overwhelmingly positive. Out of the initial twenty-one letters sent out to vendors, HSC received eleven responses detailing company goals and initiatives regarding diversity. HSC's Wiley representative shared the vendor letter with other universities that were in the process of the same type of evaluation. This led to a meeting between Elizabeth Speer and the University of Virginia about the approach taken to evaluate HSC's library collection. A new vendor, whom HSC ultimately decided not to enter into an agreement with, sent a letter of thanks to the library expressing how much he appreciated the discussion and request for diversity information because it prepared him better for future negotiations.

Due to the changes in vendor communications put into place, library staff has experienced positive changes. Vendor emails sent directly from HSC's assigned account representative are more focused and relevant to the needs of the library and collection. Mass emails are still sent out from company automated systems, but the individual emails sent are better suited to the needs of the university. Contract negotiations over the last two years have focused more on known needs. Vendors could leverage DEI as a selling point, and packages were altered, often at no additional cost to the library, to increase the diversity of content. And the regularly scheduled meetings have meant that library staff know what changes to content and packages are forthcoming so that decisions can be made more easily.

Effect on the collection

The overall effect on the collection has been positive. Since the diversity evaluation was completed, the library has been able to add

e-book content valued at over \$12,500 by negotiating products in place of annual access fees from a single vendor. These titles were selected from an extensive list of DEI titles based on feedback from HSC. The library also added three new image-heavy databases at a null cost increase by renegotiating existing packages from a single vendor to include more diverse content. An additional \$7,500 in individually selected diversity titles were added in fiscal year 2021, with an additional \$7,500 to come as fiscal year 2022 ends. A single journal subscription focusing on an underserved minoritized population was added to support John Peter Smith Hospital Library, which HSC provides contracted library services. And finally, because ILL services are supervised by the electronic resources and acquisitions librarian, HSC was able to leverage ILL in place of automatic purchases that may not conform to new collection diversity standards. Having a single point of contact for purchasing, library contracts, and vendor communications has helped to streamline and facilitate changes to the collection.

Moving forward

Due to changes in policies and procedures, the HSC library will continue to send letters to new companies and vendor representatives. DEI evaluations will be added to all contract negotiations. Vendors will be required to provide the previously voluntary response to DEI requirements that will be added to their vendor file upon new contract periods or renewals. And, of course, the collection will continuously be evaluated for gaps in research materials. This will be facilitated by evaluating ILL and purchasing requests as they are received. By implementing these new standards into the normal workflow of collection development, HSC should continue to see positive changes to vendor communications and collection development diversity growth.

Appendix A



Gibson D. Lewis Library

January 25, 2021

[Company]
[Company Address]

Dear,

In our continuing efforts to live our values, abide by our code of culture, and influence change, Gibson D. Lewis Library has immediately implemented the additional criteria of equity, diversity, and inclusion, for evaluation of future and current purchases of academic and clinical resources.

As an institution of higher learning, it is our duty and privilege to educate future medical professionals. As stewards of this responsibility, it falls upon us to provide our students, staff, faculty, and administration with the most culturally diverse materials available. It is our expectation that vendors with which we enter into business will embrace the need for change and will make conscious efforts to broaden their level of diversity by including a broader spectrum of materials which clearly demonstrate the importance of including people of all races, gender identities, socioeconomic backgrounds, and cultures.

Gibson D. Lewis Library looks forward to opening a positive and beneficial dialog with all of our current and future business partners about this important topic and how we can work together to be a catalyst for change.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Elizabeth Speer".

Elizabeth Speer
Electronic Resources & Acquisitions Librarian

THE UNIVERSITY of NORTH TEXAS HEALTH
SCIENCE CENTER at FORT WORTH

TEL: 817 735-2000 | 3500 Camp Bowie Blvd. Fort Worth, Texas 76107 | unthsc.edu

Contributor Note

Elizabeth Speer is the Copyright and OER Strategist and previous Electronic Resources and Acquisitions Librarian, the University of North Texas Health Science Center at Fort Worth, Fort Worth, Texas, USA.

Notes

- 1 Charles Taylor, "Together We Stand as ONE University," accessed June 12, 2020, <https://www.unthsc.edu/provost/together-we-stand-as-one-university/>.
- 2 University of North Texas Health Science Center at Fort Worth, "HSC 2022 View Book," accessed July 1, 2022, https://www.unthsc.edu/wp-content/uploads/03_07_22_066_OMC_HSC-View-Book-2021-22_final2.2.pdf.
- 3 PolicyMap, "Fort Worth and Surrounding Areas 2020 Data," accessed July 2020,
- 4 Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, s.v. "Diversity," accessed July 5, 2022, <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/diversity>.
- 5 Elizabeth Speer, letter to vendors, fall semester 2021.