The Great ReenVisioning: Reframing, Recruitment and Retention in Libraries

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Presenter

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Recorder

Abstract

Libraries and organizations across all sectors are still grappling with the staffing impacts of The Great Resignation, as well as the longstanding need and increased calls to diversify their staff. The growing adoption of more inclusive approaches toward doing so is providing an encouraging path forward; yet we must still be careful that these efforts and the language used to push them forward actually address the inequitable systems that continue to impact historically marginalized populations. This presenter discussed the narratives around diversity recruitment and retention and how we might reframe these conversations to center equity, organizational accountability, and community care.

Keywords: recruitment, retention, diversity, equity, inclusion

Introduction

Tarida Anantachai, Director, Inclusion & Talent Management at North Carolina State University Libraries, addressed the need to reframe

recruitment and retention efforts. A number of recent factors have brought these conversations to the forefront, including the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, where organizations saw a dramatic spike in retirements and resignations; the intersecting 2020 Summer of Racial Reckoning; and the increased urgency within organizations to diversify their staff in light of these overlapping concerns and calls to action.

How It Started

While some evidence suggests that a number of industries were already seeing increased quit rates before the COVID-19 pandemic, organizations across all sectors experienced an even more pronounced period of resignations during the pandemic.[1] This phenomenon, dubbed The Great Resignation, has been prevalent throughout the library workforce as well.[2] Anantachai explained that the resulting Great Recruitment to replace staff was further impacted by the 2020 Summer of Racial Reckoning, which shone a light on the structural racism that resulted in the murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, among many others, and called for organizations to put into practice their subsequent declarations of racial solidarity. Adding to that the longstanding recognition of libraries as historically white institutions caused libraries to reignite conversations about the need to diversify and to address the inequitable practices and cultures that have contributed to their collective status as a predominantly white profession.

How It's Going

Anantachai observed how the wave of recruitment in recent years has provided an opportunity for libraries to reassess their organizational practices and culture. On one hand, several job postings and

organizational value statements included investments in diversity-focused positions and reaffirmed commitments towards advancing equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). She provided several screenshots of headlines from library and higher education publications as examples. Yet Anantachai cautioned that many of these efforts, and merely applying labels or quick statements, are not enough to change a culture embedded with systematic inequities without deep and sustained organizational commitment.

As one example, as of July 1, 2020, *Library Journal*'s InfoDocket had collected over 166 statements from libraries and other library organizations condemning anti-Black racism and violence, and declaring their support of the Black Lives Matter movement.[3] Yet libraries have also often disproportionately called upon their Black, Indigenous, (and) People of Color (BIPOC) staff to help craft or vet such statements, and to take on the emotional labor of other EDI initiatives, in addition to their regular work assignments—and often then find their labor misappropriated in the process.[4] At the same time, libraries and organizations across all sectors also saw an increase in EDI roles and a renewed interest in incorporating inclusive hiring practices in order to diversify their staff; professional library associations such as the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) have also seen this reflected in their programming, with Anantachai observing at least a dozen presentations on inclusive recruitment topics alone at the recent 2023 ACRL Conference.

How Have We Framed Conversations Around Diversification?

Anantachai noted how, when it comes to conversations around diversifying, there can often be at least one of two sets of frameworks at play. The first is the business case for diversity; some elements of this framework include how it centers on the organization and the extractive value of an individual to it (for example, the presence of employees from historically marginalized groups providing evidence of meeting

EDI goals, and the tokenization implications behind this). In doing so, it also promotes capitalistic and colonialist notions of diversity, treating these staff as business commodities and putting the onus on them to fix an organization's so-called diversity problems—further perpetuating white supremacy culture. The framing around the business case for diversity also tends to appeal more to those from the dominant culture, as it focuses on how they will benefit from being among a more diverse community.[5]

Another framework is the moral imperative for diversity. This framing centers on individuals' humanity and aims to correct systemic inequities with cultural humility, rather than encouraging appropriation or assimilation. It seeks to create support structures and conditions of psychological safety where those individuals from historically marginalized groups do not bear the responsibility of righting the inequities around them. The moral imperative also promotes social justice and community care; it asks organizations and those within them to not just be welcoming and nice, but to also interrogate such notions and be proactive bystanders, advocates, sponsors, and accomplices. Organizations and individual staff must actively listen so that historically marginalized colleagues are authentically heard and are not implicitly or explicitly required to perform whiteness to succeed. As opposed to the business case, the framing around the moral case for diversity also tends to appeal more to those from historically marginalized groups.[6] Anantachai encouraged the audience to reflect upon the approaches noted in the moral imperative, and what accountability measures and goals libraries can mindfully put into place to better center the needs and lived experiences of their historically marginalized colleagues.

How Might We Reframe Recruitment?

Anantachai then shared some general principles on embedding such moral imperatives into the recruitment process. Recruiters in libraries should strive to increase transparency—such as salary transparency, supplying questions and other materials well in advance, intentionally

providing detailed information about what candidates can expect during the interview process, and being upfront with both candidates and themselves about the library's organizational culture. She also urged hiring managers to change processes that are centered on whiteness and the dominant culture. Some examples included not focusing on the perceived professionalism of how candidates dress and present themselves, and by not asking questions and scenarios designed around whiteness as the norm, nor on the benefits that people from historically marginalized groups will bring to their space. She also called upon search committees to eliminate similarly extractive practices that ask for additional labor from their candidates, including requiring unnecessary supplemental application materials or statements, and treating candidates as free consultants through questions or presentation prompts intended to solicit new ideas on existing services.

How Might We Refocus on Retention?

Organizations must focus energy on more than just recruitment; they must also pay significant attention to retention. She reflected that for some organizations retention can often be harder to discuss because it is ultimately about sustained organizational culture work, examining their own historical barriers and inequitable systems that may be undermining their recruitment efforts, and the accompanying discomfort.

Anantachai listed a few similar strategies for reframing conversations on retention, mirroring the moral imperatives of recruitment. These included providing mentoring and more structural systems of support; she noted how individual measures alone are not sufficient, particularly those that put the primary onus on an individual employee to seek support on their own. Rather, libraries and the employees within them need to think about cultivating community and collective care through onboarding and mentoring programs and affinity groups, but also through organizational investments in anti-oppressive management and bystander intervention practices. Other principles

include intentionally investing in employees' ongoing development, including at mid-career and beyond, and providing appropriate recognition and compensation for their work. This also means funding and otherwise supporting employees to engage with and build their communities, such as within the National Associations of Librarians of Color, the Joint Conference of Librarians of Color, We Here, and local and regional caucuses. As with recruitment, libraries need to continually examine and invest in correcting structural policies, procedures, and practices that reproduce whiteness and the dominant culture within their everyday work. Proactively providing transparency and matrixed support around colleagues' journeys towards tenure and promotion is one example, as well as preparing the review committees themselves to interrogate and mitigate the inherent biases that are often embedded in such evaluative systems. In other words, libraries need to be continually building their own internal capacities to center and support their historically marginalized colleagues, to invest time and care in them, and to examine not if, but where inequities currently exist and how to correct them.

What's Next

Anantachai pointed to a couple of then recent articles that provided additional insights into the current and future challenges in conversations around diversification. A December 2022 *Nature Human Behaviour* article analyzed several federal datasets and concluded that the representation of United States faculty would not reach racial parity with the general population at its current rates, and would need to diversify by three and one-half times this pace if they want to achieve this parity by 2050.[7] An *Ithaka S+R* issue brief by Curtis Kendrick found similar parallels within librarianship, observing that if the profession were to increase the total number of BIPOC librarians to 25 percent, approximately 500–1,100 additional BIPOC would need to graduate every year for the next ten years.[8] However, these numbers and

conversations continue to focus on diversity as primarily a pipeline issue. The same *Nature Human Behaviour* study also highlighted how between 2007 and 2019, over 45,000 PhD graduates from historically marginalized groups were not then hired into tenure-track positions. Similarly, a number of library organizations and schools have long sponsored various diversity pipeline scholarships and initiatives (such as the American Library Association's (ALA) Spectrum Scholarship Program and the Association of Research Libraries' (ARL) diversity programs); yet what remains missing are conversations about measuring organizational equity, improving the organizations into which these librarians are entering, and the structural and reparative work needed in order to purposefully retain and advance them.

Some other factors unrelated to libraries have presented additional challenges. As one example, a number of state legislatures have proposed anti-EDI legislation at colleges and universities, as tracked and monitored by *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.[9] These have included bills aimed to restrict diversity offices and their staff, mandatory trainings, and the use of diversity statements and identity-based considerations in hiring and admissions. Such efforts have had a chilling effect not just within higher education and libraries but also on the lived experiences and sense of belonging for the historically marginalized communities who exist within them. Despite this legislation, Anantachai offered some hopeful avenues for advancing EDI into the structure of an organization, such as by intentionally incorporating these values in organizational development and design work (another growing area within libraries).

Conclusion

Anantachai concluded her remarks with a few observations. Addressing EDI in an organization can be a deeply personal issue, particularly for those from historically marginalized groups, and directly impacts them not just as library workers, but as people and the communities around them. Anantachai noted that while neither she nor any one

person has all the answers, she asked the audience to reflect on their own individual positionalities (and even their libraries' organizational positionalities), how they frame their own language and approaches to EDI initiatives, and how they might all reenvision their libraries and practices going forward. To close the presentation, she offered a Mariame Kaba quote, which she keeps close at hand as she does this work and offered to the audience to carry with them in theirs, that "Hope is a discipline."[10]

Question & Answers

Before opening the floor for questions, Anantachai shared some guidelines that were informed by indigenous scholar Eve Tuck:[11]

- Consider peer-reviewing your question with another audience member.
- Make sure it is really a question.
- Make sure you are not trying to say that you should have given the presentation.
- Figure out if the question needs to be posed and answered in front of everyone, and if your question is asking the speaker to do work that you should do.

Q: During the pandemic, my institution created an EDI committee, and now the committee has been disbanded. What can I do?

A: Without knowing the full institutional context of this scenario, committees like these need a clear charge, budget, and structural support. It's important that this committee has some access to power and influence if they are being tasked with cultivating culture change. A colleague once described less effective EDI committees as those that only focus on "festivals, flags, and food." Yet even without a committee, think about how that work can be embedded in the work that is already happening, and how we can cultivate that as an organization. At the same time, we also cannot simply treat

EDI as a crisis that we "fix" and then consider done until the next crisis. This is ongoing work.

Q: I was in a mentoring program and have a question about the *Nature Human Behaviour* article. What advice do you have for BIPOC librarians when they are applying and interviewing for positions?

A: Look and ask for what opportunities there are for mentoring, what communities of support there are, etc. But also ask those that are interviewing you direct questions about the culture, on what they have been doing to advance EDI, and about what structures are in place to (and any specific examples of ways they) support their BIPOC employees. Listen to what is and isn't being said, and by whom. It's also important to do research about the institution; the Green Book for Libraries (https://librarygreenbook.com) is one resource, as are communities such as We Here (https://www.wehere.space). People and communities talk, and there have been folks there and within other BIPOC networks who are generous in providing insights on their and others' experiences at various organizations.

Contributor Notes

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Notes

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4   Alexandria Brown, James Cheng, Isabel Espinal, Brittany Paloma Fiedler, Joyce Gabiola, Sofia Leung, Nisha Mody, Alanna Aiko Moore, Teresa Y. Neely, and Peace Ossom-Williamson, "Statement Against White Appropriation of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color's Labor," *WOC + lib*, September 3, 2021, https://www.wocandlib.org/features/2021/9/3/statement-against-white-appropriation-of-black-indigenous-and-people-of-colors-labor.

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10 Mariame Kaba, "Hope Is a Discipline, Kaba on Dismantling the Carcel State," *The Intercept*, March 17, 2021, https://theintercept.com/2021/03/17/intercepted-mariame-kaba-abolitionist-organizing.

11 Eve Tuck (@tuckeve), "I was just asked by a colleague how I facilitate Q & A sessions—I guess the word is out that I am very deliberate about how an academic Q & A should go after a talk or panel . . .," Twitter, June 19, 2019, https://twitter.com/tuckeve/status/1141501422611128320.