Building Trust

How Understanding Users Can Lead to
Inclusive and Equitable Library Services
Interviews with Students of Color

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ABSTRACT In the fall of 2020, interviews were conducted with
students of color at Trinity International University. The goal was
to better understand the experiences students of color have had
with the library, how the library can be more welcoming, and ways
that librarians can work toward anti-racism. This paper reports key
themes from the interviews. It also describes the lessons learned
about having these discussions and provides suggestions for other
librarians wishing to connect more with their students of color.
Engaging in intentional conversations with students of color can
help librarians build relationships with students and gain valuable
insights into how the library can better serve students.

INTRODUCTION

Building stronger connections with our students of color has long
been something I have been interested in doing. However, various
constraints held me back, including anxiety about approaching a
vulnerable topic. The events of this last year, including the murder of
George Floyd and a growing emphasis on diversity, equity, and inclu-
sion in higher education, gave me the impetus to finally take action.

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anti-racism. This paper reports key themes from the interviews. I also
describe the lessons I learned about having these discussions, and
provide suggestions for other librarians wishing to connect more
with their students.

The six students interviewed came from the seminary and the
liberal arts college at the university. They represented a variety of

racial and ethnic backgrounds, including African American, Asian, and Latin American students. Most of the students were American-born. Potential students were found via a variety of sources, including the Intercultural Development Office, a student group focused on racial reconciliation, recommendations from another librarian, library student workers, and my own connections. Because of COVID restrictions, all interviews were conducted via Zoom and recorded. (See Appendix 1 for the interview questions that were asked.) Afterwards, I reviewed the recordings and noted themes and ideas. I presented the results to the rest of the library staff, and we made plans for responding to the suggestions.

I will describe some of the challenges of doing this kind of study. Doing interviews with students requires some risk on the part of librarians, as well as for students. However, if librarians are willing to engage in vulnerable conversations with students, they will have the opportunity to build connections and gain valuable insights into how the library can better serve students of color.

CHALLENGES AND REFLECTIONS

One of the challenges I faced in doing these interviews was what Lahman (2017, 14) calls "othering," which is a "process that identifies those that are thought to be different from oneself or the mainstream [which can] reinforce positions of domination and subordination." My concern was that intentionally selecting students of color to interview could reinforce that I think of them as different from myself. In addition, Williams (2019) interviewed students at Trinity International University about their experiences with microaggressions, and found that "part of what prompts microaggressions directed at minorities is 'differentism': treating people who are different with unwarranted attention or curiosity, thinking of them as odd, not like oneself." I worried that asking these students too many questions would be experienced as that kind of harmful curiosity. However, Lahman (2017, 17) goes on to say that "knowing the other" is the major motivation for doing qualitative research, and it can also give those interviewed an opportunity to have a voice. I hoped that the students could feel empowered to tell me things that they wanted me to know in my role as library director. I decided to make the questions open-ended, so the students could talk about what they cared about.

In contrast to my concern about "othering," I discovered the interviews helped me realize the similarities I had with these students. I intentionally tried to interview some students who do not use the library, to understand their experiences. One student said she preferred to study at home, since she was an introvert and homebody, and I realized I was the same way as an undergraduate student myself. This helped me internalize that those I see as being different from myself can actually have many similarities, which is helpful as I work to connect with them and also consider changes in the library to benefit them.

It was challenging to recruit students to participate in the study. I reached out in a variety of ways, by sending emails to leaders in the International Student Office and Mosaic (a student group for racial reconciliation). I also contacted students of color that I and another librarian knew. I was unsure how my invitations came across to the students, especially since many of them did not know me, and as library director I am an authority figure. An African American peer in my PhD program afterwards gave me some suggestions on doing this kind of research. She said to communicate clearly that I have no personal agenda beyond learning and growing. At the beginning of the interview, be vulnerable and tell a little of my story. These are both things I would like to do better next time. She also said to have a "thick skin," be willing for them to say no, and give an open invitation to talk anytime they are interested.

One of the positive results of the interview process was facing my own anxiety about this potentially risky topic. I had hesitated to do this study because I was nervous about doing or saying the wrong thing and causing damage. The best way to overcome those fears was just to do it and not be held back by the anxiety. In listening to one of the interviews afterwards, I could tell there was nervousness in my voice, but I could also hear the student being interviewed relaxing and opening up more as the interview progressed. My anxiety was not a hindrance. In fact, it may have helped her feel more comfortable. Being welcoming and encouraging in how I approached the interviews was the most important factor. The student told me afterwards she enjoyed the interview, and it felt like a positive relationship was built, which was the best hoped-for outcome.

INTERVIEW THEMES

The students shared a number of thoughts and suggestions. A common theme was the idea of having comfortable space in the library. One said that "study for me is finding comfortability in my surroundings so I can focus and be reassured by a familiar area and people." Other students talked about ways to make the space more comfortable, including beanbag chairs, furniture for lounging, mood lighting, etc.

Perhaps an even greater part of comfortability and welcome is having a community of people the students connect with. One of the questions asked where the students feel most supported on campus. The common answer was the Mosaic Room; Mosaic is a student group promoting racial reconciliation. Their faces would light up when they talked about the space. "It's not just the place, but the people who gather and form that community... We do life in community together." A couple students expressed appreciation for social space that had been created in the front of the library. However, one student talked about feeling disconnected from other students in the library and feeling awkward approaching them. He described trying to ask another student a question and having them look at him in surprise. The culture of many of the seminary students is one of solitary study, which may be difficult to change. However, it could be possible for the library to help in this endeavor by creating a setting that encourages students to connect with each other.

Although the full-time library staff are all White, the students liked seeing student workers at the front desk who represented different races and cultures. They also appreciated when the student workers were friendly and welcoming. One person noted that customer service is more important than any other factors in creating a welcoming environment for students of color. Another student told a story from her past about a librarian who was unfriendly and grumpy and how that affected her. A doctoral student gave advice on how to recruit more librarians of color. She said to pay attention to your internal bias and that people will generally tend to hire people who are just like themselves, so there must be intentionality in hiring people who are different from yourself.

Another topic we discussed was library policies. Ibram X. Kendi (2019) says that all policies are either racist or anti-racist. It can be helpful to reconsider library policies from this perspective. For example, the American Library Association (2019) passed a resolu-

tion last year stating that library fines are a matter of social justice, since it can discourage low-income people from using the library. Our library, along with others in our consortium, is discontinuing fines this year. As part of the interviews, I asked students about their perspectives on library policies. Overall, they were supportive of the policies; they were particularly appreciative of clear policies for different noise level zones in the library.

Some of the students saw libraries as particularly ideal places to learn about culture and work toward anti-racism. One student reflected on her experiences with her public library when she was growing up. She described seeing the different cultures in the community represented in her library, through people, books, and community events. "I love libraries. Especially as a multicultural American, libraries are one of the safest places in the community for me to learn about myself, to learn about other people, and also to feel safer in my community because I am affirmed and other people who are diverse are affirmed as well." Another student, who is biracial, described how the library can help her learn more about her African American culture.

A couple of the students also noted that the library can play an important role in actively working against racism. "Libraries have power in their communities. Unfortunately, many librarians are not aware of that power they have to create community or destroy it." She thought that the library "really has to take the lead in culture change on campus. It is one of the most-utilized buildings on campus, and it's become the face of Trinity." This was empowering to hear. Often librarians can feel like a small entity on campus, without much influence, but from students' perspectives the library can play a large role in how they perceive the campus's approach to race. The president at Trinity recently shared his vision for the school, and one of his strategic priorities focuses on race ("President" 2020). Ahmed (2012, 58) says that it is helpful to have the administration speak about diversity so it can "pass down the chain" to those actually doing the work. The university leadership can create a call to change, but achieving cultural change will occur at the level of places like the library, where students interact with the school in tangible ways.

The students suggested a variety of ways for the libraries to visibly demonstrate welcome to students of color. For example, they suggested having rotating exhibitions in the display cases about different cultures, including cultural artifacts and the experiences of the students. Having more artwork and decor representing different

cultures is another visible sign of welcome. The library could have more book displays on cultural topics and racial issues, as well as events for learning about different cultures. One student suggested having crafts and different foods to engage with a particular culture. A common suggestion was also to get more books on race, books covering cultural topics, and books in different languages that our students read.

In response to these suggestions, the library is talking with student groups to work on cultural displays, book displays, and artwork. We also hope to work on ways to make the space more comfortable, such as improving the lighting. We plan to continue to build our collection on topics of diversity, equity, and inclusion, as well as books in other languages.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Overall, the students were positive about the library. Even students who did not use the library regularly did not report any negative experiences. I wondered if the students were reluctant to bring up any unfavorable perspectives on the library with me. Duke University Libraries did an intensive study in 2020 of their students of color with interesting results (Chapman et al. 2020). Along with positive feedback, they received reports that the libraries, "while not actively hostile or racist, are complicit in their silence" (Chapman et al. 2020, 2). The students asked for more visible signs of inclusion in the library. The study utilized graduate students to conduct focus groups, with the idea that students would be more comfortable and open with them than with librarians. This could be a helpful approach, and I am curious if we would have gotten more honest negative responses if I had not been the one doing interviews. However, there was also value in my being able to connect directly with students and personally build open communication and relationships with them. One of the results I valued most was the new connections I formed with students.

I would encourage librarians to take at least small steps toward connecting more with their students of color. There is value in forward movement on this issue, whatever form that may take. It is good to be careful and concerned about the approach, but not to let anxiety prevent us from taking some kind of action. Being willing to

take the risk of being vulnerable ourselves can open us up to learning valuable insights from our students.

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APPENDIX 1

Note: I tried to plan a variety of follow-up questions so I could adjust based on the comfort level of the students. However, I did not end up using all of these questions. In particular, the "easier follow-up questions" did not prove to be useful.

Base questions:
- What is your experience with libraries? What about the TIU library?
- How much have you used the library? What would make you more likely to use the library?
- How welcome do you feel in the library compared to other areas of campus? Where do you feel supported on campus?
- What changes can the library make that would make you feel more welcome?
- What is the library doing well?
- What concerns do you have about the library and how it works?
- Where have you heard about the library? What ways would be best for you to learn about the library or connect to its resources?

Harder follow-up questions if the students seem comfortable:
- What has been your experience interacting with people of different races in the library?
- Do you think any of the library policies should be changed?
- What are things librarians can do to be working against racism?

Easier follow-up questions:
- Have there been times where you've felt welcomed or had positive memories in the library?
- What makes you feel welcomed and safe in any context?

Wrap-up:
- What year are you in school? What is your major? How would you describe your racial or ethnic background?
- Snowball - Do you know of any other students it would be good for me to talk to?