
LIGHTNING ROUNDS

Taking Steps to Decolonize Library Collections, Policies, and Services

Caroline Fuchs, Professor and Dean of Libraries, St. John's University

Heather F. Ball, Assistant Professor and Critical Pedagogy Librarian for Student Success, St. John's University

ABSTRACT Emergent issues relating to equity and inclusion have highlighted the systematic and structural inequities experienced by society, which trickles down to our institutions, deeply affecting researchers using library collections and services. While events have shined a light on the overt disparities among social, ethnic, racial groups and other marginalized populations, they have also offered libraries an opportunity to make changes to their ethos and practices. This paper provides an overview of a multi-year approach implemented at an academic library to intentionally re-imagine its collections, policies, and services to decolonize the library with little or no extra expenditures. Steps taken and discussed will showcase some creative, practical, and manageable steps that all libraries can take to better promote social justice, and equity for all. By taking these simple steps relating to equity, diversity and inclusion, libraries can transform their practices and environments, resulting in a more transparent commitment to decolonize collections, services, and policies.

St. John's University is a four-year doctoral degree granting Catholic university in New York City whose mission brings together our various identities into one: a Catholic, Vincentian, metropolitan, and global university. On June 6, 2020, University's Senior Leadership

signed an Anti-Racism Statement (<https://www.stjohns.edu/news-media/announcements/antiracism-statement-university-senior-leadership>) making a commitment to becoming an anti-racist institution and, in turn, all units within the University were asked to develop action plans to move this commitment to fruition. The question for us was: what do we need to do to decolonize the University Libraries that was in keeping with this anti-racism commitment?

Essentially, the answer is slowly, thoughtfully, intentionally, by honoring a variety of perspectives, and through identifying a strategic pathway towards developing the fundamental steps for success. To move forward with this work, we followed four guiding tenets: de-center whiteness; apply that critical lens to our collections, services, and resources; develop mechanisms to honor marginalized voices; and acknowledge and therefore remediate for systemic oppression.

To decolonize our libraries, we had to make a commitment to do the work — not just on paper, but in everything we do. To that effect, our first phase focused on the following changes and endeavors. To begin, we created the Libraries Joint Statement on Anti-Racism (<https://www.stjohns.edu/libraries/about-libraries/antiracism-statement-and-action-plan>), signed by the University Libraries, the Rittenberg Law Library and the Kathryn and Shelby Collum Davis Library. Next, the University Libraries re-wrote our mission and vision statements (<https://www.stjohns.edu/libraries/about-libraries/our-mission-and-vision>) to reflect our commitment to anti-racism and inclusion. This new mission and vision would guide us in reviewing and revising library policies. In 2020, the University Libraries established the Anti-Racism Task Force, which was comprised of library faculty, administrators, staff, and students. The task force was charged with developing a plan to continue the anti-racism work that had begun. Some of the accomplishments of the task force were the development of an inclusive-practices workbook, a library-wide inclusive practices scan, an assessment of the Libraries' website for inclusion and accessibility, and an ebook EDI assessment. This task force was also charged with creating training modules for all library employees focusing on anti-racism, and associated diversity, equity, and inclusion concepts, including definitions, challenges, and potential implementations within the Libraries. Several trainings were held each semester.

The Anti-Racism Task Force continued its work for two years. In the fall of 2022, the task force was replaced by the Libraries Inclusivity, Diversity, Equity and Anti-Racism Committee (LIDEA), a standing committee that reports directly to the Dean of Libraries.

As stated above, the first step that the Libraries took in furthering the University's commitment to becoming an anti-racist institution was the development of a Joint Statement on Anti-Racism, which has been publicly posted on our websites since 2020. The statement reads:

The University Libraries, the Rittenberg Law Library, and the Kathryn & Shelby Cullom Davis Library are united in opposition to systemic racism and racial violence. Pope Francis reminds us that "we cannot tolerate or turn a blind eye to racism and exclusion in any form." Therefore, our libraries, in keeping with Catholic social justice teachings, must strive to affect the common good rather than claim a neutral stance. In support of St. John's University community of students, researchers, and scholars, we stand together in commitment as allies in the intentional pursuit of anti-racist practices, policies, and collections.

Once we had adopted the Anti-Racism Statement, we revised our mission and vision to reflect our renewed commitment to decolonize the Libraries. These were likewise publicly posted on our website, and read as follows:

Mission: St. John's University Libraries advance the teaching, learning, research, and scholarship of the University. We are committed to open, accessible, equitable and inclusive practices in instruction, services, collections, and policies.

Vision: St. John's University Libraries will be recognized as an essential academic partner in the teaching, research, and mission endeavors of the University. We will foster academic success by honoring the diverse voices of scholarship in our communities as a means of empowering our students and faculty to freely discover, create and share new knowledge.

From there, we began looking at our policies, starting with our collection development policy. In the end, we made the decision to replace the structured collection development policy (which focused on "what" we were collecting) with a new (and more fluid) collection development philosophy (which shifted the focus to "why" we collect). Our Collection Development Philosophy was also publicly posted on our website just below our revised mission and vision (<https://www.stjohns.edu/libraries/about-libraries/our-mission-and-vision>). It states:

St. John's University Libraries identifies, acquires, manages, and provides access to physical and digital resources to support current curricula needs, to promote scholarly research and inquiry, and to encourage critical practices that allow our community of users to create new knowledge that has the potential to be transformative in nature. The Libraries acknowledges

the impact of the evolving information-seeking practices and firmly adheres to an ethos of free and open access to information, freedom of expression, and the need for our collections to reflect diversity and interculturality.

In building our collections, we recognize that Libraries are not neutral and as such our traditional collecting practices may have excluded the voices, experiences, and perspectives of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and other marginalized groups. With our continued commitment to be an anti-racist and inclusive institution, the Libraries is working toward a more just future for the St. John's University community of scholars and researchers. To accomplish this, the Libraries will endeavor to:

- Approach collection development with cultural humility and remain open to what we do not know,
- Critically examine the “authority” of a work through the consideration of author identities, perspectives, and historical context in an effort to break down barriers produced by structural oppression and implicit/explicit biases,
- Prioritize collection choices to include intentional consideration of historically marginalized authors and creators,
- Collect materials in a wide range of formats and media in recognition that there are many ways to learn and know,
- Build collections with an ethos of equity and accessibility, and with a commitment to open scholarship that honors scholarly activity,
- Establish healthy, robust, extramural collections through active dialogue with campus partners including faculty and students.

We believe that adherence to the University Libraries Collection Development Philosophy will contribute to the intellectual, social, and emotional well-being of our students and other members of our campus community.

The next policy we focused on was the Library Code of Conduct, which provided us with the opportunity to have deep discussions about what it meant to decolonize our services, collections, and services. Filled with “no’s” and “don’ts”, our Code of Conduct now sounded harsh to our ears. Rather than revising it, we decided to take a new approach by creating Community Norms, which have been posted in both our physical and virtual spaces (<https://www.stjohns.edu/libraries>). Adopted by the Library Faculty Council on November 2, 2021, it reads:

St. John's University Libraries foster the open exchange of ideas and inquiry in a respectful environment free of harassment. Harassment may include comments, gestures, facial expressions, or imagery that demeans people based on language, religion, ethnicity, gender, physical or mental disability, physical appearance, or sexual preference. Those using library spaces, services and resources will treat other library users and employees with consideration and respect. We will respect the rights of others, and practice self-discipline. We will help protect the library collections and spaces while holding ourselves and each other accountable for keeping these norms. Together we can create a library environment that is welcoming, caring and affirming.

Making these changes to our policies was only one piece of the puzzle, the external piece; the second piece was the internal changes for our faculty, administrators, and staff. This work was continued under the direction of the Anti-Racism Task Force.

As we continued with our work, we wanted to determine if our collections were in keeping with our commitment to anti-racism and decolonizing the Libraries. To that end, we decided to undergo a review of our digital resource collections. After conducting an environmental scan of our ebook collection, and a DEI comparative project with sister institutions, we found gaps in our collections that could be easily mitigated outside of a larger collection review process. We added to our digital collections:

- Approximately 200 DEI eBook titles
- African American Newspapers
- Civil Rights & Social Justice
- Oxford African American Studies Center
- Slavery in America & the World
- LGBTQ+ Source
- Women & Social Movements
- *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*
- *Ethnic and Race Studies*
- *Ethnicities*
- *International Migration*
- *Journal of American Ethnic History*
- *Journal of Immigrant and Refugee Studies*

With these shifts in content and our commitment to highlighting more marginalized, non-Western voices and perspectives, we continue to take the steps necessary to move away from conglomerate packages and companies to provide more equitable content to our users.

At this point, we began to examine the organizational structure of the Libraries. We began by rethinking library-faculty roles and the potential for creating more DEI-focused positions and responsibilities. These manifested in the creation of three new faculty titles: Coordinator for Inclusive Practices, the Critical Pedagogy Librarian for Student Success, and the Academic Engagement and Outreach Librarian. The coordinator position has been tasked with running scans, surveys, and focus groups across all areas of our work to ensure that our practices are in keeping with our commitment and were as inclusive as possible. Working groups were created for each area: collections, instruction, services, online access, library website, Discovery layer of the catalog, and inclusive culture within the Libraries. This is ongoing work. The main priorities of the second position were designed to provide guidance on critical pedagogical approaches, use research-based approaches to help further library initiatives in this area, and to merge the ACRL Frames with critical theory frameworks and applicable lenses for our instructional practices. Finally, the Academic Engagement and Outreach Librarian has been working to design, coordinate and conduct outreach initiatives and strategic partnerships with a variety of collaborators on campus, coordinating with the library faculty liaisons to keep current on accreditation needs regarding library resources and services, as well as programs emphasizing the academic role of the University Libraries in advancing the strategic initiatives of the University. Additionally, the Engagement and Outreach Librarian partnered with the assistant vice president for equity and inclusion to successfully procure an ALA Great Stories Grant, with the theme of “Deeper than Our Skins: The Present is a Conversation with the Past” (<https://www.ala.org/tools/programming/greatstories/resources/skins/libraries>).

To repeat what was said earlier, this process to decolonize the Libraries was meant to be mindful and intentional, not just a one-off project that might be done to fix everything all at once. To that end, the second phase of this work delves into our programs, committees, and overall structure.

By the fall of 2022, the charge given to the Anti-Racism Task Force was nearing completion and the task force was dissolved. While the

work of that group continued to inform our next steps, the Dean created the Libraries Inclusivity, Diversity, Equity, and Anti-Racism Committee (LIDEA), which was charged with establishing goals, objectives and an action plan that supports the University Libraries' commitment to becoming an anti-racist institution in our collections, services, policies, and spaces (<https://www.ala.org/tools/programming/greatstories/resources/skins/libraries>). The goals of LIDEA are to:

- Incorporate principles of IDEA into all library policies,
- Revise service procedures to better to create a more inclusive environment,
- Ensure collections support IDEA research and scholarship,
- Provide a plan to create physical and virtual spaces in the Libraries that are welcoming, inclusive, accessible and usable.

The first year of the committee work has seen the review, assessment, and reworking of all library extant library policies (and several newly-created policies) to include IDEA-minded language and spirit. Simultaneously, we have begun the process of revitalizing our information literacy services, through both the creation of our credit-bearing information literacy program as well as our existing instructional workshops and liaison areas. Currently in development, the re-imagined information literacy program will be designed to have a more formalized credit-bearing structure that will offer courses that use critical pedagogical approaches and tools to incorporate critical perspectives more fully and explicitly into our students' information literacy coursework, such as critical literacies in a global context or marginalized knowledge and other ways of knowing. Workshops will also be given to the Libraries' faculty-librarians to show ways of incorporating critical pedagogical practices into their existing workshops and liaison areas.

An integral piece of the puzzle at any library is always the user, so to incorporate our students' voices, perspectives, and needs into the University Libraries, we created the Libraries Student Advisory Board (LSAB). This advisory board is facilitated by a faculty member but only in a loose administrative role (i.e., booking rooms for meeting times). Once the board members were chosen (with equal representation across colleges, grade levels, and several other factors) and the first meeting convened, roles for the Chair and Recording

Secretary were voted on, and it was they who ran the board's schedules and agendas. They were tasked with serving as both conduits and advocates between the University Libraries' administration and the larger student body to provide transparent information exchange between Libraries' administration and the student body on programs, services, and collections, to promote library programs and collections to their peers, and most importantly provide feedback and recommendations from the student body on their research and resource needs. To that end, the first cohort of the LSAB provided the Dean with a report outlining several recommendations on our offerings and services, which is currently under advisement with the Dean and Provost. Our other initiatives include incorporating anti-racism and DEI efforts into our annual strategic plans going forward, as well as providing ongoing professional development opportunities for library faculty, administrators, and staff.

The final piece of this change puzzle is in the unit level; it isn't enough to have one or two people doing this work — instead everyone within the Libraries needs to be a part of it. And that can be done through mindful re-organization that replaces a static hierarchical structure with a dynamic, fluid, and flexible approach that's built on these shared roles, responsibilities, and knowledge. Although currently in the conceptual phase, the rationale behind the reorganization are: to develop an organizational structure for the University Libraries that is not steeped in whiteness and traditional power structures; to create an organizational structure that signifies a non-Western approach to the organization of the University Libraries that is based on space and place and community rather than power; to replace a static, rigid, hierarchical approach to organizational structure with a dynamic, fluid, flexible approach that is built upon shared and/or overlapping roles, responsibilities, and knowledge; and, to build a foundational organizational structure for the University Libraries that incorporates the practical application of the theories of critical librarianship and critical pedagogy. Using these goals to shape how our unit is structured and functions can only enhance our services and commitment to inclusivity and support for our students.

Important to keep in mind during all these changes is that the Libraries are not the only ones doing this work on our campus. We are fortunate that there are so many colleagues and partners already doing great work on campus who are willing to collaborate to share

ideas and resources. To that end, the Libraries have developed working partnerships with the Academic Center for Equity and Inclusion, the Inclusive Teaching Institute, the newly formed Critical Race and Ethnic Studies Institute, and the newly re-formed RESPECT conflict mediation specialists.

The overview of the ongoing anti-racism projects and our work to continue to intentionally decolonize the Libraries as presented above are still at the beginning stages. We have a great deal of work to do, but we continue to remain strong in our commitment to become an anti-racist institution.

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