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Student learning and engagement in a DEI collection audit

Applying the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy

In Spring 2021, the University of the Pacific conducted a diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) audit of the library's book and scores collections with eight student interns. This article provides a summary of the project and how we used the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education's knowledge practices and dispositions to design the internship experience.

The University of the Pacific

The University of the Pacific is a small, private liberal arts institution with campuses in Stockton, Sacramento, and San Francisco, California. In Fall 2021, 6,066 students were enrolled in Fall 2021, 3,306 of which were undergraduate students.¹ The DEI audit took place at the William Knox Holt Memorial Library and Learning Center on the Stockton campus, which is where the undergraduate programs are based.

Pacific's undergraduate student demographic is quite diverse. As of 2021, the undergraduate gender demographics were 52% female and 48% male. Ethnicity composition was 35% Asian, 24% Hispanic, 21% White, 8.8% international, 4.4% multiethnic, 4% Black, 0.5% Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, 0.3% American Indian/Alaskan Native, and 2% Unknown.² However, a question weighs upon the minds of the members of our community: Do the university libraries collections reflect and support the diversity of our student population?

The DEI audit

The idea to pursue a DEI audit came about after Pacific's president asked all units to engage in social justice work following the death of George Floyd. The two primary goals of the DEI audit were as follows:

1. To foster conversations on issues of diversity in publishing and library collection development practices with the campus community.
2. To make the library collection more representative of Pacific's student body.

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The project was led by the assistant dean for user services and programs. Other key team members included the head of Publishing and Scholarship Support, the director of Collection Strategies and Discovery Services, the head of Special Collections, and the health sciences librarian.

We hired eight student interns from a variety of undergraduate majors, including biochemistry; cross-disciplinary studies; music; history; political science; and health, exercise, and sport sciences. Each intern was assigned lists of titles to evaluate based on criteria that we developed together. The criteria included book details (title, author name, publication date, discipline), author identity (gender, ethnicity, location, disabilities), book cover representation, fiction vs. nonfiction, character identities, subject matter representation, publisher demographics, and publisher company CEO identity (gender, ethnicity). The full list of audit criteria is available in Google Forms.³ The titles were randomly sampled from areas in the collection that matched the curriculum of Pacific's schools and programs. We involved the interns in the early steps of the decision-making process, from the construction of the DEI audit methodology to the final presentation of our results at conferences.^{4, 5, 6, 7}

In addition to evaluating the library collection, the DEI audit team created a learning community for reading and discussing articles pertaining to DEI issues in publishing and librarianship. These included

- Articles that offer advice on conducting a library collection audit;^{8, 9}
- A case study audit of a collection of plays in an academic library;¹⁰
- An article discussing the demographics in the realm of scholarly publishing and how they skew white and male;¹¹ and
- An article on how book reviewers for the *New York Times* are predominantly white and male.¹²

This book club-style activity grew organically, and interns remarked that our discussions about the articles were the best parts of the experience: “I really enjoy the thoughtful conversations we’re having at the biweekly meetings. It is important to have conversations about these topics” and “The experience was really rewarding and insightful. Working with the library staff on the project was really amazing because we got to ask them a lot of questions and they were able to talk to us about what happens behind the scenes in the library.” The readings provided a launching point for exploring new and innovative ways to address and resolve the inequities in our collections, at our institution, and beyond.

A DEI audit is a tremendous undertaking but was made even more difficult because it occurred during a semester where we were teaching, learning, and working remotely due to the pandemic. Therefore, all interactions were held over email, Zoom, or Slack, and interns were unable to go to the shelves to view the print materials they were evaluating or easily peruse the library's print materials to assist with their research. Some interns struggled to complete their work due to personal mental health issues or because they were overextended from other commitments.

The results of the audit were not unexpected. Nevertheless, the data provides a benchmark and an opportunity to create change. Full results from the audit can be seen in presentations given by the authors and the student interns (see notes 4–7).

Overall, in our review of the sampled titles, we see that Pacific’s library, and librarianship as a profession, have a long way to go. Despite the lack of diversity, the positivity we felt when working with student interns on this project keeps us optimistic in our belief that involving our community of learners today can bring about future change.

Engaging student interns with the Framework

We created three learning outcomes to accompany the job description for the DEI student internship. The learning outcomes were broad and driven by the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education in order to structure the learning experience.¹³ The Framework is an established tool that offers multiple avenues for deeper learning. In the following sections we describe the three learning outcomes and their corresponding frames. Other institutions may be interested in prioritizing some frames over others or rearranging the methodology for their own DEI audits involving students. While we note that the Framework currently does not “emphasize antiracist pedagogy in the information literacy classroom,”¹⁴ it provides a foundation to build upon.

Learning Outcome #1: Students will learn how library resources are acquired and cataloged

Searching as Strategic Exploration

Interns used their own knowledge and dispositions for this frame by determining which search tools and terms to use, how to manage their searches and results, and ways to refine their search strategies. As a result, they learned how information systems—such as the library’s catalog and databases, Wikipedia, and other internet reference resources—are organized. Interns also had to navigate a lot of ambiguity in terms of how long to search before moving on to the next criteria.

In addition, we had several conversations about the difficulties of gathering information on authors’ and composers’ gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and disability status. Interns were uncomfortable with making assumptions. We agreed that capturing this information was important, but it is often unavailable. For example, identities can shift over time and people may choose not to publicly disclose aspects of their identity.

Information Creation as a Process

Interns had the opportunity to learn more about the creation of books. An article we discussed explained the biased demographics of the publishing world, and interns learned how a white, male-dominated leadership structure in publishing affects the kind of content and types of authors that are published.¹⁵ Interns also read an article about how the *New York Times Book Review* has been historically biased,¹⁶ which facilitated a fantastic discussion about how a book review can influence book purchasing decisions and create and reinforce systemic inequalities.

Learning Outcome #2: Students will learn about diversity, equity, and inclusion issues in libraries, the context of specific disciplines, and in the publishing world

Information Has Value

For this frame, interns learned about how some groups or individuals could be under-represented or systematically marginalized in publishing and academic libraries. Toward

the end of the project, the library was awarded a grant by the university's diversity, equity, and inclusion committee to purchase DEI titles. We invited the interns to recommend purchases, and, as a result, they were able to contribute to diversifying the collection and creating value.

Authority is Contextual

Throughout the auditing process interns reflected on the traditional notions of granting authority, considered how authority is constructed in academia, and learned that diverse ideas and worldviews sometimes have to be sought out. We had a conversation about their course readings and whether or not they noticed their professors intentionally bringing in diverse voices, thereby helping interns build awareness of their capacity to assess content they were learning from a critical stance.

Scholarship as Conversation

Interns were able to view firsthand how information systems privilege certain people over others. While this was disheartening for them, it spurred important conversations about how the world of scholarship is changing and how we can actively work toward dismantling the systems that traditionally uplift white, male voices.

Learning Outcome #3: Students will develop critical thinking and information literacy skills by assessing materials in the library collection

Research as Inquiry

While evaluating the titles, interns developed their own methods for searching and gathering information. Interns shared the strategies with the team, and we encouraged them to seek help from librarians and each other when needed. They frequently and repeatedly drew reasonable conclusions based on the information they were able to locate.

Conclusion

A DEI audit is a tremendous undertaking. We highly recommend involving students because it generates excitement and enthusiasm and can foster a productive learning environment for all. While ours were paid student worker positions at \$1 over the minimum wage, other universities and colleges might have options for unpaid internships or course credit, if done in tandem with faculty. We believe there needs to be some tangible benefit for students engaging in this work, however, and pecuniary compensation provides a direct recognition for the rigor of the work and the student's contributions.

Assessments administered at the beginning, middle, and end of the project showed us that interns' understanding about DEI issues in libraries and publishing had changed from a surface-level understanding toward a more action-oriented attitude. Incorporating the ACRL Framework can help guide the activities and conversations library workers initiate with students.

Many journal publishers are investigating and adjusting the gender make-up of their editorial boards,^{17, 18, 19} and scholars are raising awareness of whose voices are heard in the dichotomous split between developed and developing nations.^{20, 21, 22, 23} While there may be limited practical actions that library workers can take individually, we can lead students to

become part of the conversation and understand their place within it, thereby increasing self-awareness and stimulating social action. As one intern stated in their feedback about the DEI Audit, “Learning the facts about this project will allow me to inform other students of the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the other parts of the university.” ❧

Notes

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