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Black Lives Matter!

Shedding library neutrality rhetoric for social justice

On August 9, 2014, Michael Brown, an unarmed black man, was fatally shot by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, sparking community unrest and provoking a national debate on racialized police violence. Brown's death, the recent deaths of other unarmed black citizens at the hands of white police, and the subsequent #BlackLivesMatter¹ protests that erupted nationwide in response, should prompt us to examine our mission as librarians. What is the role of the library—and the librarian—in confronting the killing of Michael Brown and many others, such as Eric Garner, Gabriella Nevarez, and Tamir Rice? What are we saying if we say nothing? And considering librarianship's stagnation in promoting greater diversity within the profession, how might we respond to these events by interrogating our own struggle with these issues?

In light of Ferguson, the University of Arizona (UA) Libraries created a research guide² to collect related resources for our campus and to offer, in our highly diverse community, support for information needs. Likewise, we wanted to create a starting point for faculty interested in incorporating these issues into their courses.

Another major impetus for creating this guide was to demonstrate that the library is an ally, providing students—students of color in particular—with another safe space on campus. If the library is meant to serve our entire campus community, we should

be thinking about how to provide social and emotional inclusivity alongside our academic mission. We don't solely support our community members through provision of resources, technology, and study spaces—these are all important, but are only pieces of our larger mission. Positioning the library as anti-racist, anti-sexist, and anti-oppression helps us stay at the heart of the community, particularly in challenging times. This guide is just one example of an approach at one institution; there are many more ways to support our students, and other libraries have taken a variety of approaches to this.

We intended for our Ferguson research guide to provide support for campus in a time of crisis, in a way that allowed the library to be a partner and a collaborator. We were able to use the guide to reflect our instructional philosophy, engage underrepresented groups on campus along with faculty and staff, and confront the problematic notion of envisioning the library as neutral.

Using critical pedagogical approaches on campus

We believe that the pedagogy underlying our instructional design impacts student

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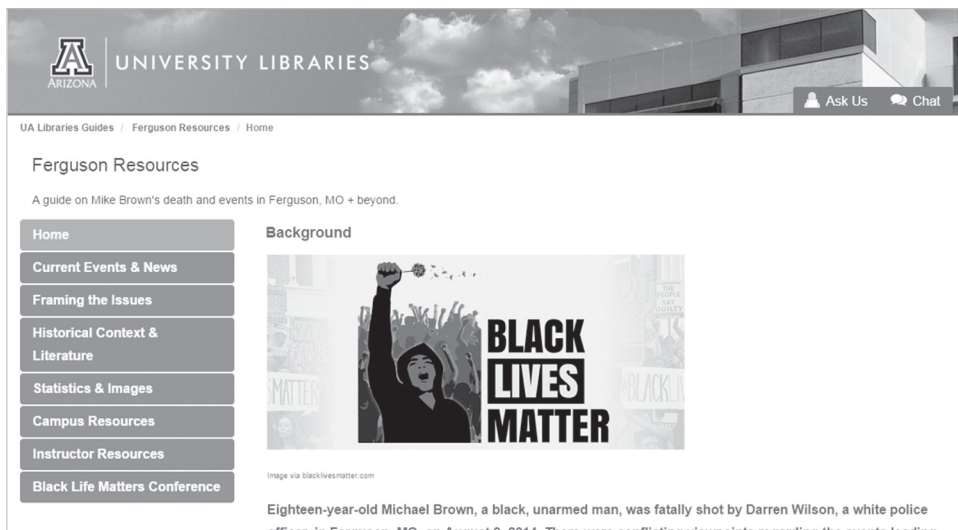
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learning. *How* we teach warrants as much thoughtful consideration as *what* we teach. At the UA Libraries, critical pedagogy—the incorporation of social justice and critical theory into instructional praxis—informs our instruction librarians’ practice and guiding philosophy.

After Ferguson, as the national dialogue surrounding race in this country intensified, we felt a strong responsibility to leverage technological and pedagogical tools to address this crisis. We hoped to gather resources

color, and promotes diverse perspectives and voices in higher education.³

UA’s strategic plan includes a campus goal to “recruit and retain a diverse student population.”⁴ Payne Hiraldo notes in her discussion on critical race theory in higher education, “an institution can aim to increase the diversity of campus by increasing the number of students of color. However, if the institution does not make the necessary changes to make the campus climate inclusive, the institution will have a difficult



UA Ferguson research guide. View this article online for more detailed images.

that would provoke further discussion, inspire critical thinking, and demonstrate our recognition of social inequity and structural racism in this country.

The guide grew organically—as it was shared, we incorporated links as requested, from colleagues in the library, and from faculty and staff on campus. We set out to collect a variety of resources—news, statistics, scholarship, literature, blogs—on not only police violence, but on racial injustice more broadly, from a variety of perspectives, particularly those that are not as frequently heard. We saw a need, as information literacy instructors involved in student learning, to contribute to a campus climate that acknowledges institutional racism, is supportive of students of

time maintaining diversity.⁵ Thus, for the library, as a highly visible academic unit that serves the entire campus community, making efforts to engage with underrepresented groups and promote social justice is crucial.

As Myrna Morales, Em Claire Knowles, and Chris Bourg note, “academic librarians are perhaps uniquely equipped and empowered to define and redefine systems of knowledge that convey ‘truths’ about what we know about the world and how that knowledge is organized and evaluated.”⁶ This power lies in our ability to select and organize resources that support research and scholarship but also in our roles as instructors to the student population as a whole. The guide was an extension of that mode of

thinking—in the spirit of critical pedagogy, we wanted to encourage examination of issues that impact our communities and voice our support for students of color.

Student retention and inclusion

There is an affective (emotional and social) component to student retention. Numerous studies over the past 35 years have demonstrated that noncognitive attributes are major components in student persistence; affect being an influence that could carry more weight than GPA.⁷ Focusing on #BlackLivesMatter and reaching out to our black campus community in particular through this research guide is a way to show that the UA Libraries acknowledge and care about racial and social inequity. When structural racism impedes the success of groups of students and other campus community members, we should find ways to intervene.

Brent Mallinckrodt and William E. Sedlacek align this charge by stating that “because of racism, black students have a more difficult time adjusting to a predominantly white campus. Hence the time that successful black students must spend in developing a sense of community and an identification with the campus tends to be greater than that spent by white students.”⁸

The same holds true for some faculty, as a number of recent articles and blog posts by faculty of color have demonstrated.⁹ This is a dilemma even within library and information science (LIS), as Nicole A. Cooke describes in extended documentation of her struggles as a faculty member of color on a predominantly white campus.¹⁰

The ongoing existence of institutional racism and white privilege substantiates the importance of being aware of how neutrality functions in both higher education and in libraries. If we understand that there is a false construct of neutrality in libraries, and that libraries can even reinforce institutional oppression,¹¹ we should ask ourselves how our collections, organizational schemes, interfaces, instructional

practices, and learning objects impact our communities. Regarding Ferguson and #BlackLivesMatter, if we see that “neutral” is often a replication of the white (and male, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied, and middle class) perspective, how could we possibly endeavor to create a neutral research guide on this topic that doesn’t position people of color as the “other”?

We teach our students more abstractly about the necessity of investigating bias through information literacy instruction, and here we can see it manifested in a very tangible way. For example, in collecting news sources speaking to these topics we are faced with a challenge. Mainstream media often depict people of color as criminals (especially when compared to whites), regardless if a crime has been committed,¹² and even Google search results based on “relevance” invoke harmful stereotypes of people of color.¹³ This inherent bias makes neutrality near impossible when including these types of resources in a research guide. Positioning biased perspectives about people of color as value-free, authoritative, and anything but a source that requires further investigation is detrimental. Trying to remain “neutral,” by showing all perspectives have value—even those that violently disregard black existence—is harmful to our community and does not work to dismantle racism. As Desmond Tutu has famously said, “If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.”¹⁴

Collaboration with faculty and campus

A note on questioning the white perspective, full disclaimer: we are both white, middle class women. Thus, it was essential for us to reach out for input and collaboration on our research guide. When attempting to create safe spaces, we should not be speaking *for* our diverse communities, but rather speaking *with* them. Our departmental subject liaison shared the guide with the department of Africana Studies and requested feedback on what faculty would

like included (or removed). We also contacted the African American Student Association (AASA) with the same intention. AASA responded that they were glad the library had assembled a resource guide, since they were hoping to do something similar, but hadn't had the resources or time. In general, faculty and campus response to the guide has been positive, and we heard from several professors who intend to incorporate it in their curriculum.

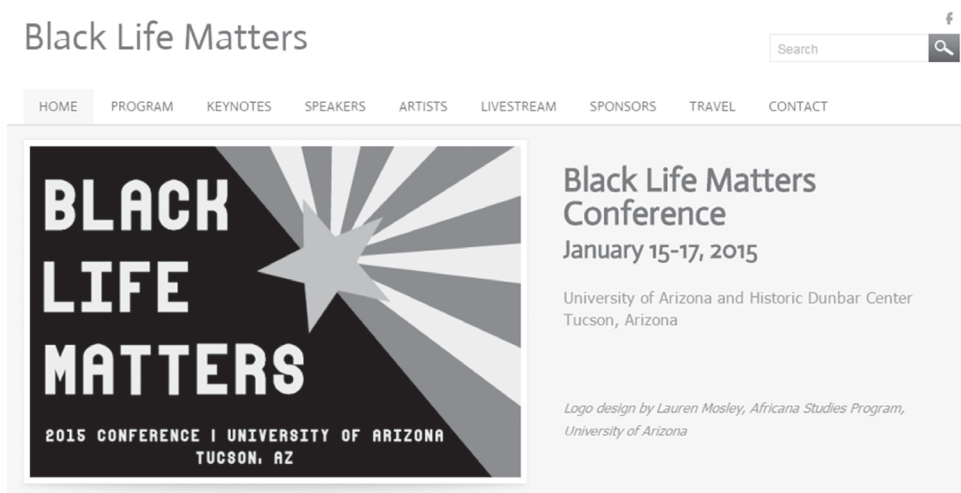
The opportunity for partnership expanded further when UA faculty in Africana Studies and Gender and Women's Studies,

Outcomes and conclusion

Since its publication in December 2014, the guide has been viewed 2,220 times, and more than ten libraries have requested to copy or adapt content. It has opened the door for more partnerships on campus, and has hopefully laid a foundation for further collaboration with faculty in the realm of critical pedagogy and social justice where, in this charge, information literacy can be envisioned as a holistic practice rather than a more singular focus on skills.

The positive response to the guide has also served as a reminder to us that quick,

Black Life Matters



Homepage for UA Black Lives Matter Conference.

who were organizing (at the time of the guide's publication) the Black Life Matters Conference,¹⁵ asked us to link to the works of scholars, artists, and activists invited to speak. The library also became a sponsor of the conference, along with other campus units, and the guide was linked on the conference homepage.

We feel strongly that the campus should work as a community, in partnership, sharing the labor of support for diversity and social justice, and not leaving the burden of effort solely to the few units on campus with these explicit charges. Systemic racism can't be confronted or resolved unless *everyone* is involved in its interrogation.

low-resource efforts can yield valuable rewards, and that academic libraries should be continually proactive in taking steps, however small they may seem, toward supporting a diverse and inclusive campus environment and society at large.

A significant first step toward supporting underrepresented groups on campus should be to look inward and consider what library policies, practices, and interfaces replicate systems of oppression. These areas might seem invisible to librarians from dominant groups because we assume the library is "neutral." It is critical to investigate whether our library practices could actually be ineffective, or

even hostile to the success of marginalized students.

In the Q&A following her talk at the 2015 OLA Super Conference, Chris Bourg called on libraries to “put the signal out that you are a safe space. And libraries HAVE to be this space.”¹⁶ To do this, it is essential to cast off the LIS security blanket of neutrality, and analyze how white privilege, among other oppressive systems, affects our work as librarians. Proclaiming “but we’re neutral!” is a way to avoid the library’s obligation to actively support all of our community members.

The practice of examining, questioning, and researching strategies for undoing oppressive institutional structures should be part of our ongoing work in academia and should be recognized and supported by institutional resources as well as acknowledged as valid outputs in the annual review and tenure processes. Working to undo institutional racism is difficult and can be a risk, especially for those in environments more hostile to these approaches. Libraries have an obligation to support this effort so that we can better serve our diverse communities while also interrogating the oppressive structures at the heart of what remains a very white librarianship.¹⁷

Notes

1. Black Lives Matter website, <http://blacklivesmatter.com>.

2. Ferguson Resources at the University of Arizona Libraries, <http://libguides.library.arizona.edu/ferguson>; librarians at other institutions also created similar guides on their own, such as at Washington University Libraries, Mary Institute and St. Louis (MO) Country Day School (MICDS), Michigan State Libraries, and others.

3. This is especially crucial at UA, given the legislative climate in Arizona, and in light of the recent ban on Ethnic Studies in state K–12 curriculum.

4. Never Settle, The University of Arizona’s Strategic Plan, <http://neversettle.arizona.edu/#url=engaging>.

5. Payne Hiraldo, “The Role of Critical Race Theory in Higher Education,” *The Vermont Connection* 31, (2010): 54.

6. Myrna Morales, Em Claire Knowles, and Chris Bourg, “Diversity, Social Justice, and the Future of Libraries,” *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 14, no. 3 (2014): 445.

7. See the following as one of many examples: Larry A. Sparkman, Wanda S. Maulding, and Jalynn G. Roberts, “Non-cognitive Predictors of Student Success in College,” *College Student Journal* 46, no. 3 (2012): 642.

8. Brent Mallinckrodt and William E. Sedlacek, “Student Retention and the Use of Campus Facilities by Race,” *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice* 46, no. 4 (2009): 571.

9. See, for example, Kirby Wilson, “Lack of Diversity Leads to Burden on Professors of Color,” *The Chronicle* (Duke University), February 10, 2015, www.dukechronicle.com/articles/2015/02/11/lack-diversity-leads-burden-professors-color#.VOYz0vnF98F.

10. Nicole A. Cooke, “Pushing Back from the Table: Fighting to Maintain my Voice as a Pre-Tenure Minority Female in the White Academy,” *Polymath* 4, no. 2 (2015): 39-49, <https://ojcs.siue.edu/ojs/index.php/polymath/article/view/2934/1000>.

11. nina de jesus, “Locating the Library in Institutional Oppression,” *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, September 24, 2014, www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2014/locating-the-library-in-institutional-oppression/.

12. See Lisa Marie Cacho, *Social death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected* (New York: New York University Press, 2012); Quentin Hancock, Tessa Jolls, and Peter Jolls, “Racism and Stereotypes in Electronic Media,” *Public Library Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (2013): 333-344; John Sonnett, Mark Dolan, and Kirk Johnson, “Speaking of Looting: An Analysis of Racial Propaganda in National Television Coverage of Hurricane Katrina,” *Howard Journal of Communications* 22, no. 3 (2011): 302-318.

(continues on page 214)

power of social media is quickly diminished with the passing of time. Students, parents, and the WFU community enjoy experiencing the event through photos and posts soon after the fact. The promptness of these postings provides the dual function of fueling anticipation for the next event, and allowing recent participants to relive the game.

Follow-up with partners

After the game night is complete, gather feedback from any partners who assisted with the event. Giving them an opportunity to give comment and identify issues ensures interest in continued partnerships.

Survey participants

One challenge is assessing the value of these undertakings. Hosting nonacademic programs in an academic library can be a hard sell. While we had plenty of anecdotal evidence that these are successful, we needed data to back up those claims.

Present participants with an optional, anonymous paper survey at the end of the evening. This measures both participant satisfaction and helps determine if these events encourage students to use the library. Post-event surveys have shown CtF and HvZ are both well liked and do encourage students to come back to the ZSR Library.

Conclusion

The Z. Smith Reynolds Library has found that

the “Capture the Flag” and “Humans vs. Zombies” big game events are exceedingly successful, low barrier ways to engage students in a nonthreatening, nonacademic way. These are models that offer some scalability for a wide variety of libraries.

With a minimal staff commitment, and a small budget, a library can provide an effective method of outreach that will encourage students who otherwise might be intimidated entering the imposing academic library for the first time.

Notes

1. Cate Calhoun, “Humans vs. Zombies at the Library: Gauging the Impact of Live Action Gaming Events on Student’s Library Use and Perceptions,” *Journal of Library Innovation* 5, no. 1 (April 15, 2014): 127–38.

2. Jamie Seeholzer, “Charting a New Course: A Case Study on the Impact of Outreach Events at Kent State University Libraries,” *Public Services Quarterly* 7, no. 3/4 (July 2011): 125–35. doi:10.1080/15228959.2011.623595.

3. Dawn Stahura and Erin Milanese, “Teaching with Zombies,” *College & Research Libraries News* 74, no. 7 (July 1, 2013): 354–56.

4. Matt Upson and C. Michael Hall, “Zombie Attacks How They Can Contribute to the Success of Your Library,” *College & Research Libraries News* 72, no. 7 (July 1, 2011): 390–93. *ZZ*

15. Black Life Matters Conference at the University of Arizona, <http://www.blacklifemattersconference.com/>.

16. Chris Bourg, “Never Neutral: Libraries, Technology, and Inclusion,” Feral Librarian (blog), January 28, 2015, <https://chrisbourg.wordpress.com/2015/01/28/never-neutral-libraries-technology-and-inclusion/>. The quote in the text is from the Q&A following Bourg’s talk and is not captured in this transcript.

17. Diversity Counts, American Library Association Office for Diversity, www.ala.org/offices/diversity/diversitycounts/divcounts. *ZZ*

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13. Safiya Noble, “Google Search: Hyper-visibility as a Means of Rendering Black Women and Girls Invisible,” *InVisible Culture* 19 (2013): <http://ivc.lib.rochester.edu/portfolio/google-search-hyper-visibility-as-a-means-of-rendering-black-women-and-girls-invisible/>.

14. Tutu continues, “If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality,” www.tutufoundation-usa.org/exhibitions.html.