

Bridging Cultures

The Role of Cataloging to Find Connection

In the complex landscape of academic libraries, a critical balance must be maintained between day-to-day operational tasks and overarching commitments to equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). This article explores a significant facet of this balance, illustrated through a recataloging project at the Goldey-Beacom College Hirons Library, initiated by a student-led collection development effort after a massive weeding project (80% of the collection) to create a third space for studying in the library. This initiative transcends typical organizational roles, weaving in themes of EDI and connecting operational work with elements of cultural identity, heritage, and representation.

We also seek to illuminate the position of student workers in academic libraries, often engaged in cataloging, administrative support, and collection development, as they find themselves at the intersection of labor, cultural identity, and cultural representation. Their participation in library projects can enhance connections to their heritage while supporting the library's mission of fostering diversity and inclusivity. In alignment with the strategic objectives highlighted in the DEI Scorecard and the insights from the 2020 ACRL Academic Library Trends and Statistics Survey,¹ we emphasize the evolving function of libraries as vibrant spaces for cultural representation, knowledge curation, and the crucial experiences of student workers in this transformative process.

The Role of Student Workers

As academic libraries have evolved, student worker roles transformed significantly. They are no longer just assistants; they are now key players with a voice in complex operations like cataloging and digital archiving. In our library, the recataloging initiative emerged as a unique educational opportunity for student workers. More than a reorganization of books, it offered a rich, hands-on experience in basic core library skills, fostering significant personal and professional growth. Student workers were at the forefront of the project, evaluating, sorting, and reintegrating books into the collection. This process required physical effort and intellectual engagement as they had to consider the relevance and value of each book within the library's evolving focus.

Spanning four years and shaped by campus renovations and adjustments due to the pandemic, the initial book reduction project brought significant changes in the library's physical layout² and a refreshed approach to collection management and cultural representation led by student workers. The initiative, designed to transform library space into study areas for

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improving student success, led to the removal of approximately 80 percent of the collection (about 50,000 books). The temporary student workers completed this project in less than six weeks through a meticulous weeding process guided by stringent criteria.

As a result of this exhaustive weeding of the print collection, many books needed recataloging, a task that evolved into an opportunity for cultural (re)discovery and personal growth for the student workers, highlighting the unique role that academic libraries can play in cultural engagement and educational enrichment. This process offered our student workers the chance to save books that aligned with their academic or cultural interests, thereby helping to preserve the library's diverse collection.

To equip them for this challenge, the library provided comprehensive training beyond standard cataloging procedures. This training included modules with knowledge checks and space to reflect on navigating cultural sensitivity, using project management software, working as a team by communicating via project management software, performing copy cataloging techniques, and fostering a deeper understanding of library operations. For example, one student discovered a rare first edition during the process. This discovery led him to engage in a spontaneous mini-lecture on its historical context.

Student workers diligently executed the re-cataloging process outlined by the library, which involved several steps. First, they transferred books from storage to carts for easier access. Next, using KOHA's built-in Z39.50 cataloging service, they performed copy cataloging by searching for each book's metadata. This process allowed them to efficiently import accurate cataloging information from external databases such as the Library of Congress, the University of Pennsylvania, Harvard, and the Seattle Public Library. After recataloging, they carefully assessed each book against specific criteria to determine if it needed replacement.

The student workers' roles in this project led to contributions beyond cataloging; they brought unique perspectives to the task, often identifying and advocating for books of cultural significance. For instance, Brazilian student worker Pedro Maia de Oliveira's unexpected encounter with *Dom Casmurro* by Machado de Assis led to a reconnection with his cultural roots, discussions with almost every one of his teammates and library director Russell Michalak, and a library display of Machado de Assis's works, sparking interest in Latin American literature among other students. de Oliveira reflects on his rediscovery of *Dom Casmurro* in a *The Way I See It* essay in this issue.

The exploration of *Dom Casmurro* built on previous projects such as student workers creating reading guides on their home culture. For example, one of the most frequently visited guides is on Latin American literature, created by a former international student worker from Brazil.³ Another former international student worker from Ireland created an Irish literature guide, and an international student worker from Russia created a guide on Russian literature to help students from Russia find books from their home country.

This project unexpectedly facilitated moments of cultural and academic discovery, especially for student workers from diverse backgrounds. Engaging with a wide range of topics and authors enabled them to connect personally with the materials, thus deepening their understanding of global literature and histories and advocating for books to be included in the collection. This experience underscores the evolving nature of student roles in academic libraries, highlighting their critical contribution to preserving and organizing knowledge.

Alignment with EDI Initiatives

The recataloging project transcended functional library management to embody the principles of EDI. Echoing the findings of the 2020 ACRL Academic Library Trends and Statistics Survey,⁴ our initiative strived to fulfill formal EDI goals, such as fostering an inclusive climate and diversifying our library collections to better reflect a spectrum of cultures and perspectives.

The engagement of our student workers was pivotal in steering the project toward these broader EDI objectives. For example, one student worker's initiative to include a neglected series of works by Indigenous authors directly supported the library's commitment to enhancing cultural representation. This specific action added value to our collection and resonated with the survey's emphasis on preserving materials from underrepresented groups.

Further, the project served as a practical platform for enacting inclusive strategies within our library's operations. In line with the top EDI strategies for staff retention and recruitment, such as creating an inclusive workplace culture, our approach involved meaningful participation and decision-making by student workers from diverse backgrounds. This participatory model advanced our EDI goals but also contributed to dismantling systemic barriers within our institutional framework.

Using the EDI Scorecard developed by the ALA Committee on Diversity as a guiding framework, the project's design aligned with the key tenets of embedding EDI into library culture. This strategic alignment was evident in our decision-making processes and the evolving composition of our library's collection. By empowering student workers to be part of these crucial decisions, we took significant steps toward integrating EDI principles into the fabric of our library's operations and culture.

This project's alignment with the broader EDI trends in academic libraries underscores its far-reaching significance, extending well beyond the confines of cataloging. It embodies a dedicated effort to shape our library into a space that is not merely inclusive and diverse but also a vibrant reflection of various perspectives and cultural narratives. For instance, we have implemented initiatives like dedicated game spaces, where students can engage in activities like playing UNO, and we have hosted regular social events like pizza gatherings every Wednesday since the library was redesigned. These efforts are more than just recreational; they are strategic steps toward creating a welcoming environment where students from different backgrounds can interact, share experiences, and celebrate diversity. This approach aligns seamlessly with academic libraries' current trends and priorities, highlighting our commitment to cultivating a library atmosphere where diversity is actively embraced and integrated into the student experience.

In line with our library's commitment to diversity and inclusivity, our approach to building a diverse collection has been strategic and multifaceted. As detailed in our comparative study, we critically evaluated book vendors to enhance our LGBTQ and Title IX titles.⁵ This deliberate effort to create value for our collection supports our EDI goals and provides our student workers with a broader range of cultural and academic resources. Their involvement in cataloging and exploring these diverse materials further deepens their personal and academic journeys, echoing our library's mission to be a dynamic cultural and educational hub.

Based on our experience, we recommend several key practices that should be adopted to fully capitalize on the diverse opportunities presented by student work in academic libraries.

These recommendations aim to enhance the role of libraries as centers for cultural exchange and learning:

- **Diversify Collections:** Proactively include a more comprehensive range of cultural, linguistic, and historical narratives in collections.
- **Involve Students in Cataloging and Collection Development:** Engage student workers in cataloging and decision-making processes, especially those from diverse backgrounds.
- **Training and Development:** Provide training encompassing cultural sensitivity and collection development.
- **Feedback Mechanisms:** Establish channels for student feedback on library collections and services.

Reflecting on the Intersecting Paths of Libraries and Students

Our story is a microcosm of how libraries evolve into dynamic spaces where culture, education, and personal narratives intersect. By engaging student workers in meaningful tasks like cataloging and listening to their stories, libraries enhance their functional operations and foster cultural exploration and learning environments. Student engagement in academic libraries goes beyond task execution; it is a cultural connection and intellectual discovery. Libraries serve as platforms for students to connect with their heritage and for others to explore different cultures, acting as bridges in an increasingly interconnected world.

Looking forward, academic libraries have the opportunity to deepen their role as inclusive centers of learning and cultural exchange. By recognizing and harnessing the diverse perspectives of their student workforce, libraries can enrich their collections, enhance their cultural relevance, and contribute to a more inclusive and educated society. The story of Oliveira's reconnection with *Dom Casmurro* is not just an isolated incident but a testament to the potential within academic libraries to transform routine tasks into opportunities for cultural connection and learning, underscoring the pivotal role libraries play in shaping our understanding of the world. ✎

Notes

1. Elizabeth Brown and Jeannette E. Pierce, "2020 ACRL Academic Library Trends and Statistics Survey: Highlights and Key EDI Findings," *College & Research Libraries News* 83, no. 4 (2022): 145–50, <https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.83.4.145>.

2. Russell Michalak, "Outsourcing Technical Services to Streamline Collection Management: A Case Study of an Academic Library's Book Reduction Project," *Journal of Library Administration* 63, no. 5 (2023): 682–99; R. Michalak and M. D. T. Rysavy, "Fostering Change to Bolster Student Success: Renovating the Library and Reducing Stacks to Create Communal Collaborative Space," *Journal of Library Administration* 63, no. 3 (2023): 371–85.

3. J. Henao, "Latin-American Literature," LibGuide, Hiron Library and Archive, Goldey-Beacom College, 2016, <https://gbc.libguides.com/LA-literature>.

4. Brown and Pierce, "2020 ACRL Academic Library Trends and Statistics Survey."

5. R. Michalak, M. D. T. Rysavy, and T. A. Dawes, "Amazon.com vs. EBSCO's GOBI Library Solutions: Evaluating New and Used Book Vendors While Building a Diverse Collection," *Technical Services Quarterly* 36, no.1 (2019): 18–43.