Black Students' Experiences and Perceptions of the Library at a Predominately White Institution

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abstract: In this study, researchers investigated the library experiences of Black undergraduate students at Penn State in University Park, a predominately white institution. Their goal was to improve services and spaces and to highlight and validate experiences with race, racism, and microaggressions on campus and in the library. Twenty undergraduate students were interviewed and asked to talk about their experiences and how these affected their perception of the University Libraries. Using the lens of critical race theory, which sees race as a socially constructed category used to oppress people of color, this study seeks to present a counternarrative to the prevailing dominant view of the library as a neutral space. Several consistent themes were identified. The themes included, but were not limited to, a low awareness of library services, lack of Black representation in the University Libraries, and a general lack of comfort within the library space.

Introduction

A series of high-profile violent incidents against Black Americans, including the killings of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd in 2020 and of Daunte Wright in 2021, sparked nationwide statements and condemnations of systemic racism from academic libraries across the country. The nation reacted in horror after the death of Floyd and the release of a video of a white police officer kneeling on Floyd's neck for nearly nine minutes. This event sparked the biggest protests for racial justice and civil rights in the United States in nearly a generation.

Penn State University is among the predominately white institutions (PWI) to act through various initiatives focused on internal transformation to promote diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility. In the spring of 2021, the University Libraries' Diversity

Committee conducted a virtual listening tour to gather feedback and recommendations regarding community needs and the University Libraries. Recognizing that they need multiple viewpoints to make meaningful changes, researchers at Penn State University Libraries focused on the perceptions of Black undergraduate students. They did so to give a voice to those students while highlighting and validating the students' experiences with race, racism, and microaggressions on campus and in the library.

This study investigates the library experiences of Black undergraduate students at Penn State University Park to improve services and spaces to better meet student needs. It also explores the extent to which Black undergraduates see the library building as a safe and inclusive space on a campus where they represent only 4 percent of the student population. Twenty undergraduate students who identify as Black or African American were interviewed virtually and asked to talk about their experiences with the library space, services, personnel, and environment and how these experiences affected their perception of the University Libraries. Library personnel were also interviewed, and the researchers conducted a content analysis of core public-facing statements on the library website dealing with diversity and equity. Several consistent themes were identified, including, but not limited to, a low awareness of library services, concern over a lack of Black representation in the University Libraries, and a general lack of comfort within the library space.

This study is important because it explores the idea that the library building may not be a neutral environment for Black students, and their perceptions of the space may have a harmful impact on their use of library services and resources. Academic libraries are committed to providing equitable access to patrons, but how is this demonstrated in practice? Do Black undergraduate students feel that they belong in the library as much as they do in other locations? With 62.9 percent of its student body white, University Park is, by definition, a predominately white institution. At the time of this study in 2020, Black students made up 4.1 percent of the population, a proportion that has only marginally increased in the past three years.[1] The Paul Robeson Cultural Center (PRCC), in the student union, is a popular place for students of color to spend time between classes. This study seeks to explore whether the main library building at University Park, the Pattee and Paterno Library, could also serve as a space of comfort, inclusion, and validation for Black students.

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Literature Review

The literature on the experiences of Black students in academic libraries at PWIs has focused primarily on how often students visited libraries and the types of services that they used. Ethelene Whitmire found that Black undergraduate students used the campus library for reading and studying more frequently than did their white peers.[2] Sharon

Table 1.
Student enrollment and library employees at Penn State in fall 2020

	Students enrolled	Full-time library employees
Overall	39,809	426
Black representation	1,626 (4.1%)	10 (2.3%)

Elteto and two coauthors also found that students of color visited the library more often than their white peers; however, they were less likely to ask for reference help. The three authors surmised that "experiential differences" may present a barrier to students of color seeking help from primarily white employees.[3] Similar findings have emerged from local studies, including a 2016 Penn State University Libraries undergraduate student survey, which found that Black students visited the library building more frequently than white students but were less likely to get help with finding resources.[4]

Comparatively little in the literature ties Black students' academic library experiences to their broader experience on PWI campuses, which is often explored through the lens of critical race theory (CRT). CRT, which has its roots in legal studies, has been used as a theoretical framework in education for several decades to center race and racism in research on teaching, learning, curricula, campus climate, educational policy, and other areas.[5] Five core tenets lie at the heart of CRT in education: (1) a recognition that racism is embedded in higher education institutions; (2) challenging the dominant ideology of meritocracy, color blindness, and race neutrality; (3) centering the lived experiences of people of color through counternarratives; (4) a commitment to social justice; and (5) a focus on interdisciplinary perspectives of race and racism.

The Concept of Counter Spaces

The concept of counter spaces, which stems from CRT, was raised in a study by Daniel Solórzano and his coauthors. Solórzano and his team investigated the effects of racial microaggressions and racial stereotyping on Black undergraduate students' academic performance and on campus racial climate. They described how students created counter spaces—student-led, nurturing, positive sites—as a form of resistance when faced with a "daily barrage of racial microaggressions."[6] A 2018 investigation by Stacy Anne Harwood and her coauthors, "Everyday Racism in Integrated Spaces," defined three types

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of counter spaces that can demonstrate the lived experiences of students of color at a PWI: (1) fortified, a white-dominated space where students of color experience clear racism; (2) contradictory, a space where racism is not openly acknowledged, but students of color are still subjected to negative treatment based on race; and (3) counter, a safe space created as an act of resistance and survival by students of color.[7]

Counter Spaces in Academic Libraries

Whitmire extended this idea to the domain of librarianship, suggesting that the library building could serve as a counter space for Black undergraduates. In an observational study of Black students in an academic library at a PWI, Whitmire found no evidence to indicate that they perceived the library as a white space where they did not feel welcomed. Students in the study indicated that the library's "familiarity" and "atmosphere" were reasons why they spent time there.[8] In contrast, Harwood identified the library building as one of many campus locations that students of color viewed as a contradictory space, where they felt both "hyper-visible and invisible" and where racial microaggressions were commonplace.[9] While contradictory spaces were seen as less hostile than fortified spaces such as bars and fraternity houses—where students experienced explicit racism—they were viewed as less safe and less welcoming than counter spaces.

In 2019, Brenton Stewart and his coauthors explored factors that contributed to the perception of the library as a welcoming space for Black students. They found that students' experiences in the building and their information needs were both significant predictors of welcomeness, while interactions with library employees were not. They concluded that other library patrons had an impact on the atmosphere of the library. Stewart and his coauthors coined the term "library theater" to denote the importance of the actions and behaviors of other patrons in the space.[10] A study on the experiences of Black students at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, found that perceptions of the library as an inclusive, welcoming space were influenced by the availability of services and resources that the students used and valued.[11] Conversely, aspects of the library that had a negative impact on welcomeness included the perception that the physical space centered white history by framing white people, white values, and white feelings as the norm. Related to the concepts of fortified and contradictory spaces, participants raised the issue of territoriality, specifically describing the ways in which fraternities and other selective living groups dominated certain areas of the libraries, making Black students feel unwelcome in locations that should be available to all.[12]

Research Questions

This study extends the existing body of literature in this field by examining Black undergraduate students' perceptions of the libraries at Penn State, University Park. It investigates the extent to which their experiences on campus and in the library buildings have affected their use of services and resources. While Whitmire's research employed an observational study and questionnaires, this paper uses semi-structured interviews to center student voices. It examines whether students view the main library building, the Pattee and Paterno Library, as a fortified, contradictory, or counter space. It also

seeks to identify ways in which the libraries can create a more inclusive environment. The following research questions are addressed:

1. To what extent are the University Park libraries perceived as an inclusive space by Black undergraduate students?
2. How have the overall perceptions of the University Park libraries impacted Black undergraduate students' use of library resources, services, and spaces?
3. How can the University Park libraries help to create an inclusive environment for Black undergraduate students?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study draws on a core tenet of CRT—the use of counternarratives to challenge the majoritarian view.[13] By centering the voices of Black students and highlighting their experiences navigating campus and the University Libraries, this study seeks to challenge the dominant view of the academic library as a neutral space. It also explores whether the students view the University Libraries as a counter space—a place of comfort, where they feel validated and nurtured—or whether another location on campus serves in this role.

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Positionality

The first author, a Black Chicana librarian, embarked on this study upon joining Penn State University Libraries after it became apparent that few students of color used library services. All three researchers in this study are people of color who have lived and worked in majority-white environments. These experiences enabled them to be more cognizant of student concerns and permitted them to focus on subject matter about which they are passionate.

Method

In the fall 2020 semester and early spring 2021 semester, the research team conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 20 undergraduate students and five library employees. The researchers also analyzed four public-facing University Libraries websites and documents related to diversity and inclusion initiatives or programs. This study was submitted to the university's Institutional Review Board, which made the determination of exempt human subject research.

Student Recruitment

Prior to recruiting students, the research team met with directors of multicultural offices from four academic colleges at University Park. These meetings served to learn more about the work of the multicultural offices, as well as to gather support for recruitment efforts. An email was sent to diversity deans, multicultural offices, and the University Libraries asking faculty and staff to share a Qualtrics recruitment form with students. Students were invited to fill out the form if they identified as Black or African American and were interested in participating in a one-hour interview via Zoom. The research team received 31 completed, eligible responses to the recruitment. From these responses, the team developed a list of 20 participants who represented a diverse cross section of students from different academic years, majors, and home cities or states of residence (see Appendix C for student interviewee information). Research team members then reached out to the selected students individually to set up interviews. More than half the participants said that they visited the library on a weekly basis prior to the pandemic, while six students said that they visited about once a month.

Library Personnel Recruitment

The research team created a list of librarians and staff members at University Park who had experience working with students either as front-line employees or through instruction. After considering input from the multicultural office directors, the team selected six individuals to contact for interviews. These potential subjects were thought to be best placed to talk about their experiences working with Black undergraduate students. Of these, five responded and agreed to be interviewed.

Interviews

All 25 interviews were conducted one-on-one and recorded on Zoom using both video and audio (see Appendices A and B for the interview protocols). Two researchers conducted interviews with library employees, while all three researchers shared the student interviews. Interviews were transcribed, and the original audio and video recordings were deleted. Each student was assigned a pseudonym, and their majors and other identifying information (such as if they referred to club membership) were removed from the report. Identifying information of library employees was also removed to maintain confidentiality.

Websites and Documents

The study reviewed three public-facing webpages on the Penn State Libraries website that were related to diversity initiatives and programs: the Civility Statement and Guidelines, the LFO (Library Faculty Organization) Anti-Racism Resolution, and the DEIA (diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility) Statement. The researchers also reviewed one pdf (portable document format) document, the Diversity Committee handout.

Data Analysis

After the first four interviews had been conducted, the team selected two interview transcripts to open code individually in NVivo 12. After this initial round of coding, the team members met and through intensive group discussion arrived at a common coding scheme. The researchers then coded a third transcript using this coding scheme and ran a coding comparison query in NVivo 12 to test for interrater reliability. This exercise prompted additional discussion and further refinement of codes, guided by memos and notes taken during the interviews and initial coding process, after which the researchers arrived at interpretive convergence. The research team continued to meet and discuss observations and initial impressions of the students' perspectives throughout the interview process. After about 16 interviews had been completed, the team began to experience data saturation, a point at which no new information was being generated.[14] Several additional interviews were conducted after this point, for a total of 20. Drawing on concepts from the theoretical framework, the research team organized and grouped codes into themes that addressed the questions posed by this study. Triangulation of the data sources was conducted to identify corroborating and complementary evidence, strengthening the validity of the study.

Findings

The Library as an Inclusive Environment

The day-to-day experiences of Black students as they traversed campus and the role that the library played in their daily activities were areas of interest for the researchers. Our study sought to learn about the students' individual experiences at University Park and whether their perceptions of the libraries were related to these experiences. Many of the students interviewed actively participated in academic and social clubs, many of which were diversity oriented. Some held leadership roles in these organizations, and others were busy with part-time jobs on campus. Nevertheless, these students still described a heightened level of awareness of being Black on campus.

Navigating Campus as a Black Student

Even traversing campus day to day as a Black student could feel "alienating," as Naomi, a senior majoring in a STEM field, described. Ethan, a junior majoring in social sciences, shared this feeling. He added that Penn State was like a "bubble" for most of the students, who did not see the absence of diversity as an issue. As noted earlier, Black students make up only 4 percent of the undergraduate student body at University Park. Said Abby, a senior: "I go into the class and I'm the only Black woman, or even Black person, in most of my classes . . . We're always knowing that we are a person of color, that we do stick out, and that's kind of our identity on campus."

Similar to the students in the Solórzano study more than 20 years earlier, many participants recounted incidents of hostility, racism, and microaggressions on campus. David, a senior majoring in STEM, said that these experiences happened frequently: "I've had a lot of negative experiences here, more than I've had in my entire life. I

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don't want to say that's, like, part of the Penn State community, but it kind of feels like, as a senior at this point, I expect a lot of stuff." Many students described being called racially derogatory terms at different locations on campus. Some reported that other students attributed their presence at Penn State to affirmative action or to fulfill a "quota." Experiencing racial microaggressions was a common refrain. One student noted that these seemingly innocuous incidents were subtle enough to cause them to second-guess what they were feeling: "It's just enough to be, like, wait, what? But it's just small enough to be like, 'Well, it's not really. Nobody did anything. So maybe your feelings aren't valid.'"

When asked about the sense of community on campus, students found it hard to reconcile the idea of school spirit with their personal experiences of being Black at University Park. Reflecting on her time at Penn State, Nina, a senior majoring in business, summed it up thus: "There's white Penn State, Happy Valley, and then there's Black Penn State, which can still be Happy Valley. It's just like a different Happy Valley. I realize I'm figuring this out now."

Inclusive, but Not "Comfortable"

For most of the students, the library was viewed as inclusive to the extent that it was open to everyone and they did not feel they were "barred" or "denied" from using it. Many said that they did not sense that the library actively promoted or encouraged feelings of inclusiveness. Rather, they felt that the space was "not not-inclusive." Noted Mia, a sophomore, "There's nothing the library does to make me feel like, oh, I shouldn't go there, or anything like that." The 12 students who visited the library weekly before the COVID-19 pandemic described the building as a place to focus and get things done, rather than a place to socialize. Susanna, a junior, explained, "The

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main point is the library isn't for social interaction. You might have friends come with you, but you're not, like, there to talk."

The students' perceptions of inclusivity in the library were corroborated by library personnel interviews. One employee described the library as a "very white institution" and suggested that library personnel may not be proactively thinking about how to reach Black students. This view was shared by another employee, who, when asked about diversity-related training, could not recall any specific program that focused on how to better serve Black students. One employee added, "I also haven't talked to enough Black students to know how they feel about the space."

The four diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) documents were also analyzed for themes related to inclusion. Although these documents are the primary public-facing

DEI-related statements on the library website, their content is mostly workplace-related rather than targeted at patrons. As a result, the analysis failed to reveal any mention of creating an inclusive environment for students.

Participants frequently described feelings of discomfort related to the library building. Many students portrayed the library as busy or crowded, causing them to feel a level of discomfort that some attributed to being in a majority-white environment. Abby, a senior, noted:

> It's not like there's entities [in the library] that will, like, bar you from being there. It may just be a sense of comfort . . . so it's, like, if a Black person walks in and they see literally only white [people], they may be less inclined to study there than if they see, like, five Black people or five people of color.

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David described worrying about doing "something wrong" that might draw attention. As the only Black person in the room, he noted, "You don't want to be, like, seen in a certain way" if you asked for help. Although this feeling was prevalent, not all students experienced it. Noelle, a sophomore, said she felt no discomfort in the building when she visited between classes and described a positive experience getting help in the library.

Students reported seeing few Black employees in the library, which added to their sense of discomfort. Some students said they would feel more "at home" if there were more Black library personnel visible in the building. This feeling was recognized by library employees. One remarked: "[The University Libraries] has gotten better at having [Black] representation in the library. But if you walk into a space that already kind of has, like, a white feeling to it . . . that can feel exclusionary." In fall 2020, there were 10 Black employees out of a total full-time workforce of 426 employees across the University Libraries. Analysis of core DEI-related materials revealed that the organization recognized this as an ongoing concern. Two sources listed on the libraries' diversity webpage included content related to recruitment. The Diversity Committee handout, a pdf document accessed via a link titled Diversity Initiatives, listed recruitment as a strategic initiative. The DEIA statement, a webpage linked under the main diversity webpage, described a commitment to prioritizing the recruitment and retention of more Black or African American employees. Neither document, however, reported current or target employee demographics.

Importance of Counter Spaces

Although Whitmire suggested that the library might serve as a counter space for Black students, it was not regarded as such by the students in our study. Instead, another location on campus, the Paul Robeson Cultural Center (PRCC), served this purpose. This role of the PRCC as a social connector among Black students was described by Sara, a junior: "Just being surrounded by them could be a restart [to] your day. Like, you might have had an interaction before, and you can go to the PRCC and talk about [it] with other

people." Many students described the PRCC as somewhere they could go to de-stress and chat, adding that they would spend several hours at a time there.

In contrast, the students saw the library solely as a place to study. When asked to compare the PRCC with the library, Anna, a junior majoring in a social sciences field, said: "The biggest appeal of the PRCC is that it's a social space that specifically keeps in mind students of color. And I feel like it's much harder for the library to do those things." Library employees, too, recognized the special role that the PRCC played in the lives of Black students. One recalled a meeting where the discussion shifted to how to better connect Black students with library resources: "Somebody brought up the point, well, if they're not coming to the library and they're going to the Paul Robeson Cultural Center, why don't we just take the resources to them?"

Information Seeking Practices and Library Use

A Quiet Library Environment

Our second research question investigated the overall perceptions of library resources, services, and space. When asked how they would describe the library building and overall environment to someone who had never visited, many students noted that the building was quiet. Sophomore student Jade said, "I feel hesitant to make a lot of noise, even slight noises, maybe typing too loud or getting up a lot to get coffee or something." Students spoke briefly about why they would not go to the library to "hang out," meet up with friends, or spend leisure time. Some students referred to the expectation that the building needs to stay quiet or to a feeling of discomfort related to lack of diversity.

Students alluded to how the space felt sectioned off, but many identified the Knowledge Commons—an area on the first floor with computers and group study rooms—as a preferred location. "I always just stayed on that Knowledge Commons side because that's where . . . I saw people like me," said Maria, a senior liberal arts major. Numerous students also openly recognized that other students of color tend to visit the library later in the day. Jasmine, a sophomore, explained:

> I think the main reason . . . my group of friends, who are, like, all . . . minority students, would feel most comfortable going so late at night, besides us being up already, is the library is often empty. We would feel most comfortable being there and being able to engage with each other at that time . . . In the middle of the day, it's not my kind of scene, I guess. I think it's because people that look like me don't go to the library at that time. So, like, just going there just wasn't as comfortable as a lot of other spaces would be.

The perception that the library environment can be too quiet has affected how often students visit the library and at what times they go there.

Library employees also made comments about how the environment may discourage Black undergraduate students from using the space. One employee remarked, I think some of it relates to, like, kind of policing, how we think about policing the space and who is responsible for some of those things. And even something like the new Collabora-

tion Commons that is so, so quiet and doesn't always lead to inclusive spaces and could deter students, particularly Black students, from studying in that space if they wanted to gather as a group and talk.

The perception that the library environment can be too quiet has affected how often students visit the library and at what times they go there.

Running around "Like the Chicken with Her Head Cut Off"

Students were asked to describe their first and most recent experiences at the library. Many students were introduced to the library their first year during a library instruction class or the libraries' Open House, an event to acquaint students and faculty with the services, collections, and resources available to them. For a little more than half the students, their experiences consisted of short visits for specific reasons. Noted Jade, a sophomore: "I would say the last time I visited was September of this year. I went to pick up a book that I had reserved and that was the last time I went to the library." For the remaining students, the library became a staple, whether they utilized the space for studying or for other resources. For example, senior student Jonah described his experience: "I spent a lot of time there, and I found out they had, like, everything I needed. Printers. Staplers. All that. So, I was in there a lot."

Although students mentioned that events like the libraries' Open House provided a brief introduction to the library, the size of the library and the number of resources available may require more continued library education. Noted Evie, a senior STEM major:

> I was required to go to the library Open House, and that was my real first experience. So, I was just [following] the tour and, like, hitting all the checkpoints . . . But honestly, even now, to this day, I just feel like the library is this massive place, and I don't think I've even touched the surface of what you can do and access in the library.

Other students alluded to their continued confusion about navigating the library. Susanna, a junior, stated that she could "remember running around the place, like the chicken with her head cut off, because I was trying to figure out where everything was." A handful of students mentioned that they were not aware of any informational events, such as undergraduate research workshops, that the library had hosted, with multiple students suggesting that the library can do much better at advertising events and resources.

We Have to Sell Our Services

When it comes to the services that are most used in the library, many students had the same response—they were not aware of all the resources and services that are available

to them. The most common library resources used among the 20 students were book or DVD checkouts, laptop rental or computer use, and printing services. Sara, a junior STEM major, mentioned that they use the library specifically for the materials instructors placed on reserves for a course: "My

Many stated that they would have a challenging time locating a librarian in the building if they needed help.

[first] year I didn't really know much about the book reserves, so that was, like, my first time interacting with the library and getting help." When asked if they remembered a time when they needed to get help in the library, most students recalled short interactions with staff at the circulation desk. Overall, students were not sure if the exchanges were with a librarian or student worker. Many stated that they would have a challenging time locating a librarian in the building if they needed help. Those who were more familiar with the library admitted that the lack of diversity among librarians could have affected their use of library resources. One employee is participating in a new pilot called the Personal Librarian Program, which aims to help students connect with library resources. That employee openly voiced concerns about this issue:

> I think that the history of libraries and engagement, especially with Black people, is particularly challenging and torn. So, you're talking about legacies and generations that have been excluded from libraries raising the next generation. So, a part of me is not surprised that students aren't coming in. But I think, you know, they [must] really realize the value of the library, and I think that's kind of our role, like, you know, we might have to sell it a little bit more.

Library Space Does Not Feel Inviting

When asked about the resources and services they most used in the library, many students identified the group study rooms—individual, enclosed spaces with technology, that can be reserved for small groups of up to six or eight people. Abby, a senior, said, "I used the study rooms just because they're nice spaces and I enjoy being able to be in a space with my friends and get some work done in the library—it helps a lot." When asked about their preference for group study rooms, Max, a senior STEM major, said of the other library spaces:

> It just feels like too many rules . . . like, it doesn't feel inviting enough for us to go there because we don't know what the benefits for us are. Because it just seems . . . we want to go there to work on our stuff freely and get it done quickly, not worry about anything else. But if we feel wrong going, like talking and collaborating, then, you know, we don't want to go there anymore.

While the students did spend time in the more open areas of the library building, they also mentioned that they felt that these places are reserved for study, not necessarily collaboration. Often, these spaces fill up quickly, and it can be hard to locate a seat. Taylor, a second-year liberal arts major, noted: "Granted, I'm not expecting everywhere to be totally empty, but everywhere is totally full, which can be annoying if you're not there to specifically use the resources."

Creating a Supportive Library

"You Belong When You See More of Yourself"

The third research question investigated how the libraries could create an inclusive environment for Black undergraduate students by asking study participants for their

recommendations on creating supportive spaces and services. The most frequent rec-ommendations were for more Black representation among library personnel and in the collection. Taylor, a sophomore, noted: "It makes you feel like you belong when you see more of yourself. And that's kind of the biggest thing I would advise towards." Some students said they would be more likely to ask for help if there were Black employees present. Jade, a sophomore, said:

> **The most frequent recommendations were for more Black representation among library personnel and in the collection.**

> I think it would have increased my interactions with the library. I would have felt a little bit more comfortable because sometimes when you go into [a] space, you don't really see anyone . . . that looks like you, and it makes you a little uncomfortable to approach a person and ask for help in that situation. So, I think if there were more Black librarians, not necessarily students, I would feel more comfortable because if I were, like, "Oh, I need a resource or I'm looking for a specific thing," I would feel more comfortable approaching a Black librarian. Especially as a first-year student.

Recommendations to increase the number of Black personnel were voiced by both students and employees. One employee suggested that the libraries should be more intentional about the way they hired student workers, although they added that it was "more challenging" to do the same for professional positions. Recommendations put forth in the DEIA document stressed the need "to act now" on recruitment and retention. This recognition by administration that the libraries must change hiring practices is a promising step toward greater diversity in the workforce. Currently, Black employees make up only 2 percent of the libraries' total workforce.
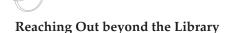
Some students alluded to the difficulty of finding culturally relevant materials, such as books by Black authors and traditionally Black movies. This sentiment supported the idea that the library centered white history. David said he would like the library to make available more material that was popular in Black households: "Movies that I, like, watched with my grandma and with my mom." Taylor, making a similar point, said that a sec-tion in the library that promoted Black authors would be desirable, while Abby

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suggested that librarians create a Black history tour of the library, where students could learn about Black authors and books related to Black history.

Library employees seemed aware of this paucity of library materials. One employee described the tension that existed in providing materials such as those described by the students, which often fell into the area that the libraries categorized as leisure reading collections. The employee noted: "Probably the more diverse authors and Black authors we're going to have are going to be in Leisure Reading . . . but Leisure Reading isn't supported. If we had collections that reflected the students themselves or their people, I think that would make a huge difference."

Reaching Out beyond the Library

It was a common notion that students did not know what was going on in the library. Most did not realize the full range of services that were available to them. They were often unaware of the availability of resources such as textbooks or of programs or events, including invited speakers and data analysis and software workshops. Noted Evie, a STEM senior, "I feel like just learning the basics of the library, like, how to check out a book and how to reserve one online, and even the protocol . . . I think a lot of people would go more." While some students said that the library should promote services and events on social media, a few interviewees made more innovative recommendations. Mia suggested that the library collaborate with the resident assistants and have them "talk to the people in their dorm floor about what the library does and certain events that they do." Jade proposed a student library ambassador program that recruited more students of color. Strengthening outreach activities was another recommendation suggested by interview participants. One employee mentioned that a "sustainable collaboration/relationship" is needed with groups like the Multicultural Resource Center and the PRCC, a recommendation that was shared by many students. Several employees recognized the importance of not "making assumptions" about what students wanted. Noted one employee, "A lot of it is relationship building, financial investment, and representation . . . and it has to be a top-down commitment that we are all in on. This is not just for the diversity librarian." Isaac, a sophomore, expressed a desire for stronger relationships with librarians, describing how he was "very close" to the librarians at his high school, who would take time to get to know the students and make connections with them.

Limitations

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic led to the university instituting a remote learning environment in March 2020, which interrupted the planning of the study design. Initially, the research team intended to conduct a much more extensive study of the students' narratives, incorporating walking interviews and photo elicitation to document their campus and library experiences. Due to the pandemic, interviews were conducted online, and students were asked to recall their most recent library experiences. For most of the students, those encounters had occurred either in early spring 2020 or in fall 2019. At the time of our interviews, in fall 2020, many students were not living on or near campus, and those who were spent most of their time in their dorms or apartments. These conditions may have affected how they felt about the campus environment.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to examine undergraduate Black students' perceptions of the library and how these observations and experiences have affected their use of library space, resources, and services. We found that students' experiences in the library are complex and depend on how often the student interacts with the library. While students experience racial hostility on the Penn State campus, those experiences rarely carry over to the library building. Although not encountering blatant racial aggression,

the students still found the library uncomfortable due to the lack of diversity. Students agreed that Black representation was missing from the library staff and materials, and that more such representation among employees would make it easier to ask questions about available resources. Both students and library personnel recognize the role that the PRCC plays in the lives of Black students at Penn State, but it was apparent that the library could never serve as a counter space for Black students

> **Although not encountering blatant racial aggression, the students still found the library uncomfortable due to the lack of diversity.**

in the way that Whitmire envisaged. The students reported that they use the Pattee and Paterno Library as a study space. Many students admitted that they were unaware of the resources that are available to them.

In December 2021, the research team met again with the diversity officers who had assisted with recruiting, and in January 2022, they met with several of the study participants, in both cases to discuss the findings and gather further input. These meetings helped to bolster, refine, and prioritize our recommendations. While these suggestions are specific to Penn State, they may be relevant to other academic libraries in large, public, PWIs with similar student and employee demographics.

Make Representation a Priority

Many of the students that we spoke to discussed how they felt uncomfortable using the space and resources at the Pattee and Paterno Library because they felt underrepresented. The researchers recommend prioritizing Black representation through acquiring more diverse collection materials and by displaying culturally relevant art and materials—not just during Black History Month. Most importantly, make a priority of recruiting diverse student workers, staff, and librarians, and track these numbers over time.

> **The researchers recommend prioritizing Black representation through acquiring more diverse collection materials and by displaying culturally relevant art and materials . . .**

Value Student Input

Many of the experiences and opinions that students talked about were things that we do not consider when making decisions for the library. The researchers recommend getting students, particularly those from diverse populations, involved in promotion and planning of events, services, and spaces. As one librarian interviewed in this study admitted, "We as an organization don't know what Black students want from the library, and we can't assume we know what they want." We suggest that the University Libraries invite Black students to provide input on future redesigns of the physical spaces and services by seeking their participation in library space planning committees or task forces.

Evaluate Communications

One recommendation that surfaced in our interviews was to create more targeted information for Black students. The researchers recommend that we evaluate how the University Libraries communicates about and promotes our services, to determine whom we are reaching and how we can better connect with a more diverse population. We also suggest making all diversity, equity, and inclusion documents, materials, and resources public to ensure transparency and to display our support for diverse student populations.

Establish Better Connections

Our findings show that we need to strengthen and broaden our current outreach activities and develop sustainable ties to Black students at Penn State. We recommend inviting student groups and societies to hold meetings and other gatherings in our buildings, which may necessitate a review of some of our current policies related to the use of library space. We should also proactively reach out and collaborate on programming with different units on campus, including the Multicultural Resource Center, the PRCC, and initiatives such as the BLUEprint Peer Mentoring program, which offers support to first-year and change-of-campus students. As Maria noted, "If you can get people comfortable early on, then going to the library can become, like, a habit." We also recommend making our resources and librarians available to students in these locations. Helping students become familiar with the resources and services we offer is an important first step in getting them to feel more comfortable visiting the physical location.

Since completing this study, the research team has met with a broad representation of stakeholders across the University Libraries, including the head of instruction and outreach, the head of library assessment, the libraries' Diversity Community of Advocacy, and key administrators. We have also shared our findings broadly in a presentation to our colleagues, with the goal of making changes to practice to improve our support for Black students in the University Libraries.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol for Students

1. Tell me a little about yourself and how you ended up coming to Penn State.

2. Tell me about your first experiences of the library on campus.

3. Please talk about the last time you visited the library in person.

4. Have you had any interaction with the library (librarians or library resources) since going remote (online or in person)?

5. How would you describe the library building to someone who's never been here?

6. Can you think about a time where you needed to get help from someone in the library? Please describe that experience to me.

7. Tell me about the place or places where you spend the most time on campus before the pandemic (besides the library).

8. Compare the library with the place you spend the most time at on campus.

9. How would you describe the overall campus environment?

10. Would you consider the library an inclusive space? Why or why not?

11. Have your experiences affected your use of the library/library resources? Explain.

12. What recommendations do you have for the library to enhance your experience?

Appendix B

Interview Protocol for Library Employees

1. Talk about your experience working with undergraduate students of color in your day-to-day work.

2. Do you ever collaborate or reach out to other units on campus that work with undergraduate Black students, for example the Multicultural Resource Center, Paul Robeson Cultural Center, etc.?

3. Based on your observation or knowledge, are there any library services or resources that Black/African American students find particularly useful?

4. Please talk about any training or professional development that you have received in the libraries related to working with students of color, and in particular, with Black/African American students.

5. In your opinion, does the library need to provide more inclusion and diversity training/professional development for staff and librarians? Why?

6. Would you describe the libraries as an inclusive environment for Black undergraduates? Why is that?

7. What do you think the libraries can do to create a welcoming and inclusive environment for Black/African American students?

8. Is there anything else that you would like to share?

Appendix C

Students Interviewed

Pseudonym	Academic year	Frequency of library visits
Mia	Sophomore	1–2 times a semester
Noelle	Sophomore	1–3 times a month
Jade	Sophomore	1–3 times a month
Isaac	Sophomore	More than once a week
Jasmine	Sophomore	More than once a week
Taylor	Sophomore	About once a week
Sara	Junior	More than once a week
Anna	Junior	1–3 times a month
Ethan	Junior	More than once a week
Susanna	Junior	About once a week
Jordan	Junior	1–3 times a month
David	Senior	1–3 times a month
Naomi	Senior	More than once a week
Jonah	Senior	More than once a week
Abby	Senior	About once a week
Max	Senior	More than once a week
Evie	Senior	1–3 times a month
Maria	Senior	More than once a week
Nina	Other	1–2 times a semester
Cameron	Other	More than once a week

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