Exploring Cultural Competence: A Case Study of Two Academic Libraries

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abstract: This qualitative study explored cultural competence in two academic libraries at a major public research university in the Midwestern United States. Interviews with academic librarians, library administrators, and library staff examined the ways in which they conceptualize diversity and how these perceptions impact their daily practices. Findings suggest that librarians and staff conceive of diversity broadly, frame all engagement with students in terms of teaching and learning, and actively pursue professional development opportunities to strengthen their cultural competence skills. Professional, institutional, and individual implications of these findings are discussed.

Introduction

As of fall 2018, 44 percent of resident students attending institutions of higher education in the United States were nonwhite, with forecasts projecting that the percentage of students of color would continue to increase.[1] Campus diversity results not only from ethnic and other variation among domestic students but also from the enrollment of international students. As of fall 2018, 269,383 new and 1,095,299 total students from other countries studied at U.S. institutions of higher education.[2] Despite diversity in the student body, recruitment of academic librarians and staff from different backgrounds continues to be a challenge, and academic librarianship remains primarily white.[3]

It is imperative that academic librarians and staff have adequate training to serve diverse students in culturally competent ways. In 2020, the American Library Association (ALA) formed the Building Cultural Proficiencies for Racial Equity Framework Task Force, demonstrating the significance of cultural competence to the library and information science (LIS) profession.[4] Recent literature regarding diversity and cultural

competence is plentiful in LIS.[5] However, scholars seldom address training, workshops, or other professional development opportunities to impart cultural competence. Therefore, it is necessary to explore what such competence looks like in practice, along with available training opportunities to develop it. Training provides the crucial link between academic librarians' and staff's conceptualizations of diversity, their job duties, and cultural competence.

This article argues that professional development opportunities should include explicit content to build cultural competence and that this guidance should be ongoing, as one-off training has limited utility. Professional development offerings should include pedagogical components, particularly instruction in culturally relevant and culturally responsive teaching methods. Some of the most effective pedagogical techniques borrow from asset-based approaches to education, which view students' differences as assets rather than deficits. These suggestions are based on data from six interviews with librarians and staff at two academic libraries that explored the following research questions: (1) How do academic librarians and staff conceptualize diversity and difference based upon their engagement with organizational diversity initiatives and their experience interacting with students from different backgrounds? and (2) How do these conceptualizations affect their service as they consider the significance of diversity in their work? The answers to these questions form the foundation of what cultural competence looks like in academic libraries in the United States.

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Literature Review

Diversity and Inclusion in Academic Libraries: A Brief State of the Field

Jenny Semenza, Regina Koury, and Sandra Shropshire examined recent LIS literature regarding diversity initiatives in academic libraries. Their analysis revealed an expansion in the meaning of *diversity* to include not only ethnicity but also such factors as socioeconomic status, age, sexual orientation, and religion.[6] The three authors found that the topics of workforce diversity, programming diversity, outreach, and displays dominated the literature. Other efforts, however, received little attention, including linguistic diversity, assessment of diversity efforts, and the use of diverse metadata to describe collections. The authors identified areas for improvement, stating, "It is likely that there is a need to step up institutional efforts in addressing librarians' cultural awareness of self and others, linguistic diversity, research reflecting non-Western thought, and diversity of metadata used to describe library collections."[7] These areas align with Patricia Montiel-Overall's conceptual framework for cultural competence, discussed in the section "Conceptualizing Cultural Competence."[8]

In a similar project, Alice Cruz synthesized diversity and inclusion in LIS literature. She identified five primary ways in which the profession addressed these issues: staff-

ing, culture and climate, collections, services, and programming.[9] Cruz argues that the numerous efforts demonstrate the significance of diversity and inclusion within the profession. She also notes, however, that many programs described in the literature have become inactive, which underscores that true commitment to diversity and inclusion requires ongoing efforts. Adhering to one-time hiring mandates, or attending a single workshop, is inadequate.

Semenza, Koury, and Shropshire surveyed doctoral research institutions regarding institutional diversity and inclusion initiatives. Their survey results found that efforts primarily fell into three categories: (1) creation, development, and enhancement of diverse library collections; (2) diversity in re-cruitment of library staff; and (3) collaborating with other campus entities.[10] Eighty-two percent of respondents indicated their libraries were involved in these types of initiatives, while 61 percent reported that their libraries conducted diversity training for library staff. The major-ity of respondents (69 percent) declared that money and resources were the most significant challenge to carrying out diversity and inclusion initiatives. Community or environmental factors

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(36 percent) also posed a hindrance. Responses suggested that the community and en-vironment of the library's region or city contributed to difficulties in fulfilling diversity or inclusion goals. Thirty percent of respondents indicated that internal library interest was lacking or insufficient to support such efforts.

That many libraries offer diversity training is commendable; however, room for improvement remains, especially when considering Lori Mestre's work regarding diversity in the LIS curriculum.[11] In a mixed-methods study of Association of Research Library (ARL) academic librarians, Mestre found that 35 percent of those whose job descriptions involved coordinating diversity efforts felt unqualified for the position they held. Furthermore, among librarians who did feel qualified, "Only a handful were knowledgeable about how to develop programming, training and campus connections related to their position."[12] Respondents who felt equipped to fulfill their responsibilities attributed this knowledge to their racial status and not to any preparation they received in LIS programs. Mestre determined that library school courses with a focus on diversity were "almost nonexistent" and that participants admitted feeling inadequately prepared upon entering the profession.[13]

Diversity Standards in Academic Libraries

Recognizing the diversification of higher education, the Association of College and Re-search Libraries (ACRL) developed standards to provide quality services to increasingly diverse students.[14] As a part of these standards, the ACRL's Racial and Ethnic Diversity Committee cites a definition of *cultural competence* from the National Association of Social Workers, which explains it as

a congruent set of behaviors, attitudes, and policies that enable a person or group to work effectively in cross-cultural situations; the process by which individuals and systems respond respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures, languages, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, religions, and other diversity factors in a manner that recognizes, affirms, and values the worth of individuals, families, and communities and protects and preserves the dignity of each.[15]

Along with this definition, the ACRL committee provides a set of 11 standards to guide academic librarians in "engaging with the complexities of providing services to diverse populations."[16] The guidelines urge that individual libraries implement the standards in ways appropriate to local contexts to most effectively serve diverse student populations. For example, academic libraries with large international student populations may incorporate culturally specific information sessions for library staff. Librarians and staff may seek to deliver services that cater to parts of their patron base, such as nontraditional students at a community college library. Utilizing the diversity standards as a guide encourages libraries to deviate from traditional practices designed for dominant, mainstream patrons. The guidelines acknowledge that cultural competence is not innate but rather is a set of skills that librarians can develop.

As the literature suggests, diversity, inclusion, and cultural competence have been meaningful issues in LIS literature for over a decade, and acknowledgment of the significance of culture remains a crucial component of work in the field. The formation of a joint cultural competencies task force by four library organizations—the ACRL, the ARL, the ALA's Office for Diversity, Literacy and Outreach Services, and the Public Library Association—recognizes the need to engage with cultural competence at the professional level. The profession has long considered the ways in which culture affects library practice and continues to grapple with issues of diversity and inclusion.

Conceptualizing Cultural Competence

Montiel-Overall's conceptual framework of cultural competence for LIS professionals is informed by guidelines from the fields of health, counseling, education, special education, and psychology.[17] The approach emphasizes the significance of culture in the fulfillment of high-level professional goals. Montiel-Overall argues that a cultural competence framework enables LIS professionals to better serve minority and traditionally underserved populations. She suggests the use of a framework because its structure allows individual librarians and staff to develop an understanding of culture's role in their work. The model assumes individuals begin with little cultural competence but encourages them to move "beyond cultural incapacity at the low end of a cultural competence continuum to exceptional cultural knowledge and understanding at the high end."[18] To adequately serve all patrons, LIS professionals require an understanding of cultural issues and how these issues affect un-

> **To adequately serve all patrons, LIS professionals require an understanding of cultural issues and how these issues affect underserved populations in their perceptions of and their use or nonuse of libraries.**

derserved populations in their perceptions of and their use or nonuse of libraries. The ongoing development of this awareness will result in increased library use and better library experiences for traditionally underserved groups.[19]

In Montiel-Overall's view, the development of cultural competence is an ongoing learning process in which LIS professionals acknowledge, appreciate, and continually work to understand cultural differences. It is a continuum upon which individuals advance to various levels of proficiency (see Figure 1).[20] Essential at the individual level are a personal desire and willingness to become more culturally competent to better serve diverse patrons. At the institutional level, effectiveness depends upon openness, participation, and agreement in determining how to implement culture into institutional practices.

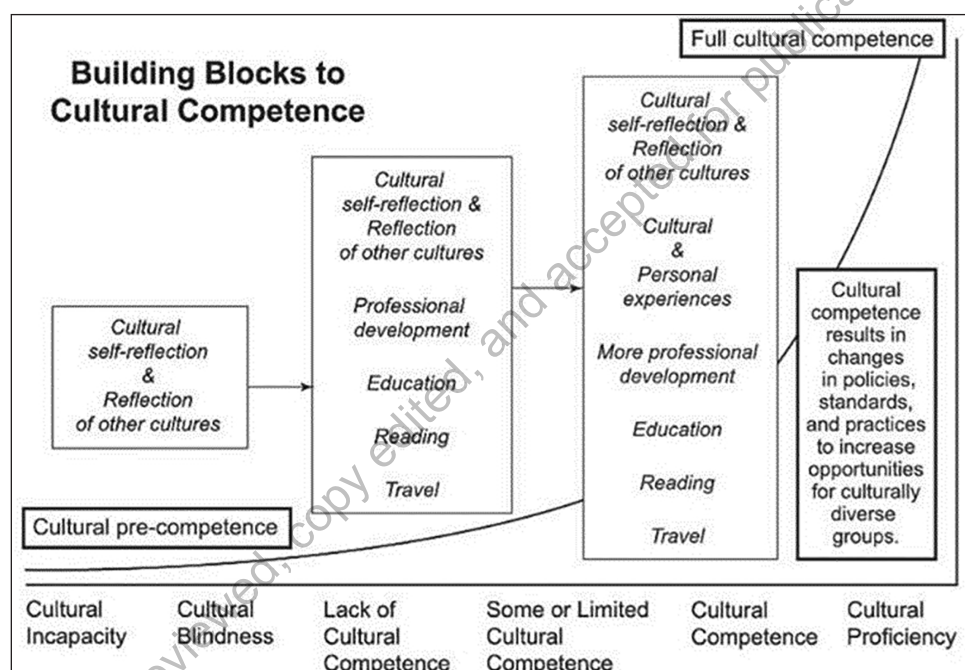**Building Blocks to Cultural Competence**

Figure 1. The components and stages of cultural competence for library and information science professionals, according to Patricia Montiel-Overall's article "Cultural Competence: A Conceptual Framework for Library and Information Science Professionals," *Library Quarterly* 79, 2 (2009): 175–204.

The development of cultural competence according to Montiel-Overall's conceptual model occurs in three interrelated domains: cognitive, interpersonal, and environmental. Cultural self-awareness and cultural knowledge develop in the cognitive domain, while cultural appreciation and an ethic of caring emerge in the interpersonal domain. Language, conditions, space, policies, rules, and regulations are considered in the environmental domain. Community culture, which includes values, customs, and prac-

tices, serves as the backdrop to the framework. The model recognizes existing funds of knowledge—historically accumulated and culturally developed wisdom—that every library patron contributes to interactions with LIS professionals.

Scholars investigating diversity and social justice issues within LIS have continually cited Montiel-Overall's conceptual framework following its publication in 2009, indicating general acceptance of the model.[21] Nicole Cooke, Miriam Sweeney, and Safiya Noble refer to Montiel-Overall's ideas as inspirational when considering how to create opportunities for integrating diversity and social justice into the LIS curriculum.[22] Freeda Brook, Dave Ellenwood, and Althea Lazzaro focus on the caring aspect of Montiel-Overall's guidelines in their critical examination of whiteness in academic library public services. In proposing a model for social justice within LIS, Kay Mathiesen identifies Montiel-Overall's framework as evidence of the need to develop more culturally competent LIS professionals.[23]

Methodology

This article discusses data collected from March to July 2020 at two libraries, the undergraduate library and the main library, in a large, predominantly white, public research institution in the Midwestern United States. Recruitment of participants began with an explanatory e-mail sent to a list of individuals obtained from library directories. The researcher contacted only those listed with explicit public service duties because the questions focused on academic librarian and staff engagement with students. In keeping with Semenza, Koury, and Shropshire's review of recent LIS literature, the study conceptualized diversity broadly.[24]

Six total participants participated. Three were academic librarians who held master's degrees in library and information science (MLIS). The fourth participant was a "library services assistant—advanced" and did not have a master's degree (see Appendix A). The inclusion of a library services assistant was a conscious decision, as these workers comprise a sizable proportion of library staff and engage regularly with students. Semi-structured interviews occurred online via video conferencing software. Follow-up questions were asked via e-mail, along with one additional follow-up interview. Supplementing the interviews were discussions with the director of the undergraduate library and the head of public services at the main library, both of whom hold MLIS degrees, to establish a broader context.

This study implemented content analysis, which seeks to understand subject matter by classifying, tabulating, and evaluating its most common themes, based on Klaus Krippendorff's description of such analysis as a research technique for making valid inferences from texts.[25] In examining the experiences of interview participants, the researcher drew conclusions from the transcripts to answer the stated research questions. Grounded theory methodology, in which a researcher reviews the data collected to find repeated ideas, then groups them into concepts or categories, informed the analysis. The researcher utilized an inductive approach, generating new theories from the interviews and drawing conclusions about patterns or themes. While this coding approach remains close to participants' words, the researcher acknowledges involvement in constructing meaning from the discussions, employing a method that therefore most closely aligns with constructivist grounded theory.[26]

To begin the content analysis, the researcher read the transcripts and created a one-page summary of each interview to identify broad categories, such as "ways librarians engage with students" and "professional development/training." These notes made it easier to read across the interviews to identify similarities, differences, and repetition. From these notes, the researcher created a set of categories (for example, "typical work-day" and "acknowledgment of difference"). In a third round of analysis, the researcher renamed these categories and created subcategories. From these subcategories, the investigator developed the set of codes, which were applied to the interview transcripts as they were reread. In the final stage of analysis, the researcher used NVivo to organize and code the interview data.

Following analysis and writing, the researcher sent each participant a memo summarizing key findings. Such checking allows participants to provide feedback and ensure an accurate description of the experiences they communicated during data collection, which contributes to the study's validity.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, recruitment occurred within two academic libraries at a single institution, which limited the pool of participants. Future research with a larger, multisite sample would expand on the present study's findings. An investigation of multiple library systems could potentially yield interesting comparative results. Second, data analysis was based upon the responses of six participants. While the goal of the study was to deeply examine the practices of individual librarians and staff, the findings cannot be generalized to a wider population. Third, because of the effects of COVID-19, data collection was limited to interviews. Additional observational methods were planned but were impossible under the conditions.

Findings and Analysis

The researcher identified three themes that emerged from the interviews: difference and diversity, engagement with students, and professional development opportunities. The following analysis also integrates data from the interviews with the director of the undergraduate library and the head of public services at the main library to explore how organizational engagement with diversity aligns with individual practice. The analysis discusses these themes in relation to Montiel-Overall's cultural competence framework, which "provides a foundation for developing a broad understanding of the role of culture in accomplishing the mission of the LIS profession."[27]

A Note on Terms

LIS scholars and professional organizations have defined and operationalized the following terms in various publications, frameworks, and guidelines:

- *Diversity*: the state or fact of being diverse; different characteristics and experiences that define individuals.[28]
- *Culture*: the acts and activities shared by groups of people and expressed in social engagements that occur in their daily lives.[29]

- *Competence*: highly developed abilities, understanding, and knowledge.[30]
- *Cultural competence*: a congruent set of behaviors, attitudes, and policies that enable a person or group to work effectively in cross-cultural situations; the ability of professionals to understand the needs of diverse populations; a highly developed ability to understand and respect cultural differences and to competently address issues of disparity among diverse populations.[31]

Practitioners in the field do not adhere to these strict definitions, however, and may conflate or variously apply terms. Semenza, Koury, and Shropshire recognized that definitions of *diversity*, *inclusion*, or both may differ among individual institutions and people.[32] The following analysis has not altered participants' language; rather, it gives primacy to their voices, experiences, and knowledge. The participants' use of terms is analyzed in the "Discussion and Implications" section.

Diversity: "I'm Aware of, Like, How White Our Library Staff Is"

Across the set of four interviews with librarians, diversity was broadly conceptualized. It included accessibility, international students, and race, which supports Semenza, Koury, and Shropshire's examination of recent LIS scholarship regarding the concept.[33]

Accessibility and Access

One way that participants viewed diversity was through the lens of accessibility. In both physical and virtual environments, attention to accessibility demonstrates librarian and staff acknowledgment of the need to provide services and resources to accommodate all patrons. While academic libraries often consider accessibility regarding electronic resources and online presence, it is also significant in encounters with students. As the interview with Alex demonstrates, these modes of engagement often overlap: "I have a lot of ongoing projects related to teaching and learning and instructional design and accessibility; making sure or understanding that people have multiple modes of learning is something I think about, especially, like, when moving things online."[34]

In both physical and virtual environments, attention to accessibility demonstrates librarian and staff acknowledgment of the need to provide services and resources to accommodate all patrons.

Alex's discussion of accessibility underscores the conceptualization of diversity in academic libraries as multifaceted. It also demonstrates an awareness of differences in how people learn and absorb information. This recognition emphasizes the need to provide information in various ways and is an exemplary trait of culturally competent librarians. In her discussion of the environmental domain, Montiel-Overall discusses the library setting from functional and social perspectives that include language, library atmosphere, and the information landscape. She briefly considers "how minority and underserved populations search for information, use it, share it, hold it and even ignore it."[35] But she does not examine the role of librarians and staff in producing and providing

information in an inclusive way to accommodate various learning styles and modalities, as Alex discusses. While an understanding of culture's impact on how diverse populations engage with information is significant, Montiel-Overall omits the critical role of librarians and staff as information mediators and their role in creating, disseminating, and providing information.

International Students

Within a large public research institution, libraries serve many international students, and participants discussed difference and diversity in relation to them. Alex described these interactions by saying, "So, talking with someone with a potential language barrier, I don't know their level of comprehension, so I tend to talk slower. I try to check in with them more that they're understanding what I'm saying on each step."

Alex highlights the potential for miscommunication and lack of comprehension in encounters with international students. When engaging with this type of diversity, academic librarians and staff do not need to speak the language of a given patron. Instead, cultural competence requires a general understanding of language acquisition and the ability to bridge language differences.[36]

From an organizational perspective, the main library proactively engages with international student communities on campus. The head of public services states: "We do try to accommodate different groups from diverse backgrounds, even as a unit, so within public services, you know, trying

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to encourage us to have greater interaction in some of the programs, especially in the context of, like, International Student Services." Considerations of international students contribute to the ways in which academic librarians and staff serve this population. The head of public services recognizes the significance of cultural differences through coordinated collaborative efforts, leveraging the resources of campus partners.

Racial Diversity

Racial diversity was commonly and extensively discussed among the participants. In the study, in which all four librarian participants were white, diversity conceptualized along racial lines made whiteness the standardized norm to which they compared diverse students. Quinn acknowledged that students from different racial backgrounds might have feelings of otherness: "I think, working regularly at the reference desk I'm aware of, like, how white our library staff is, and how that might feel to a student who doesn't share the same identity as me." Alex described interaction with nonwhite students in these terms:

> I would say that it [engagement with racially diverse students] makes a difference . . . It's a balance between trying to make sure that you're giving the same level of service and you're not making assumptions based upon your stereotypes of what they do or don't know. I'll definitely try to make sure that I'm as explicit and clear as possible. I mean I try to do that with everyone, but I feel like I'm more aware of what steps I'm showing in that situation.

Alex's acknowledgment of difference impacts the service delivered. Although inspired by a desire to provide the same level of service to everyone, altering assistance to those with visible markers of difference is problematic. Alex's attempt to be explicit and clear may come across as demeaning to some students. Additionally, students with no visible markers of difference might benefit from a more clear and explicit explanation but not receive it because their difference is not outwardly apparent.

Each of the four participants acknowledged cultural differences and how their personal, unconscious biases may impact their interactions with students from different backgrounds. Taylor commented, "There is definitely some effort to think about, as I'm doing things, such as reference or chatting, to try to take into consideration an empathetic stance and try to also be aware of potential microaggressions or other types of biases that might creep in."

Although the participants share an acknowledgment of race as significant, they differ regarding individual comfort levels in addressing racial identity in academic library environments. Two examples that could occur in formal library instruction classrooms demonstrate this point. Riley declares,

> I don't shy away from difficult conversations. I do a lot of work with people's individual topics. If somebody comes at me with a topic about apartheid in South Africa or the prevalence of heart disease in African American men, we can go into it very head-on . . . At the same time, people's comfort level and safety in these conversations is also a real thing. There's an art to allowing these things to have space without forcing people to perhaps enter a space they were not prepared to enter in their 60-minute library session.

Riley demonstrates confidence in an ability to adapt to individual students' chosen topics and to provide appropriate library and information literacy skills. Riley also seems sure of managing potentially sensitive content in a productive way. Finally, Riley's acknowledgment that certain topics and conversations have consequences in the lived experiences of students exhibits a cultural awareness of others.

Quinn's observation emphasizes the complex and multifaceted nature of confronting diversity in academic libraries:

> There've been instances where we take students' topics to use as an example, and one was about the achievement gap. So, I'm looking for articles, just on the fly. I'm aware of a student of color who is seeing these articles talking about bias against students of color, and even just the idea of the achievement gap as a concept. I'm trying to be aware of that and then reflect, and sometimes I feel like I should have been more explicit that this is a biased term that I don't agree with and just juggling all this in my head, like how do I show up as an ally in the classroom? That makes me anxious, to be in that situation.

Acknowledgment of the societal effects of systemic inequalities, manifested in education via the achievement gap, recognizes how students of color are unjustly impacted. Quinn's

comments display the challenges all academic librarians and staff face when confronting the issue of race in library environments.

While the individual librarians responded differently when confronted with diversity, each openly discussed how they acknowledge difference. These ideas align with

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organizational endeavors to promote workplace settings in which diversity and inclusion are valued. Regarding training, the director of the undergraduate library holds an initial meeting with the staff to discuss "the mission, values, and context, which include diversity, inclusion, and social justice." Following the initial onboarding, training typically occurs via weekly staff meetings with time set aside for topics that, the director reports, have included "inclusive service, implicit bias, race and policing, anti-Semitism, and disability." Similarly, the head of public services at the main library says, "I meet with new staff to discuss the institutional context of the university, library system, and [the] library itself as it relates to their position." As part of this initial training, the head encourages new staff to "engage with different committees and groups. The Equity and Diversity Committee (EDC) is high on my list of groups that I want to connect them with when they first come in." Fostering these connections at an early stage of employment sets the tone and expectations for new staff.

The acknowledgment of difference and diversity identified in the interviews corresponds to several tenets of Montiel-Overall's conceptual framework. Quinn's appreciation of the pervasive whiteness of academic libraries emphasizes the fundamental significance of cultural self-awareness, the foundation from which one builds cultural competence. In recognizing their cultural background and how it has shaped their life, academic librarians and staff interrogate their unconscious values and beliefs. These insights afford them the opportunity to better understand how others' backgrounds have shaped their present selves. In depicting cultural competence as a continuum, as shown in Figure 1, Montiel-Overall suggests that developing such competence is a linear process in which librarians move from cultural incapacity to cultural proficiency.

> **In recognizing their cultural background and how it has shaped their life, academic librarians and staff interrogate their unconscious values and beliefs.**

When Quinn mentions feeling anxious while discussing systemic biases and the idea of an achievement gap with African American students, such unease may affect the capacity to demonstrate cultural competence. Rather than being a linear progression, cultural competence is overlapping and iterative, depending on specific contexts, situations, and environments.

Riley, who expresses more confidence when confronting difficult discussions, mentions students' comfort levels and safety. This demonstrates an ethic of consideration, another component of Montiel-Overall's conceptual framework. Building on Nel Nod-

dings's concept of caring, Montiel-Overall describes such thoughtfulness as "the transforming element of a cultural competence model for LIS professionals."[37] She argues that moving from a "must comply" to an "I want to comply" disposition requires LIS professionals to engage in self-reflection. Such thinking brings them to a natural sentiment of caring for students because it is the right thing to do, not because organizational or professional values mandate such an attitude.

Taken together, the subthemes of accessibility, student status, and racial diversity represent the ways participants conceptualize difference and diversity. The next section will analyze participants' individual engagement with students to examine how these conceptualizations affect service provision.

Engagement with Students: "Everything Is Instruction"

Engagement with students occurs in many ways in academic libraries, but the dominant theme from the interviews was instruction. In practice, teaching and learning moments are varied and include formal information literacy instruction sessions and reference interactions. In one-on-one engagement with students, the dynamics change and individual biases are magnified, making an awareness of them of paramount importance. Riley explains,

> The only way to really combat unconscious bias is to try not to make judgments about who you're looking at or what their background is. If somebody offers information, or if an element of identity is appropriate to interrogate, like in a reference question, then it's fair game, but I wouldn't make an assumption based on what somebody looks like.

Taylor reports,

> I try to be a little bit more self-aware of things when I'm working with a person of color or someone of a diverse background. I do find myself kind of moving into a greater awareness because I really want to be as inclusive and unbiased as possible.

Riley and Taylor stress the significance of confronting unconscious bias and its impact on service. Riley recognizes the autonomy and agency of individual students and strives to refrain from judgment unless students first offer information about their background. Taylor demonstrates similar reflection and attentiveness to the ways biases and assumptions may impact engagement with students and so strives to avoid acting inappropriately.

Other, less formal encounters with students, such as during circulation duties, are also considered potential instructional moments, as Taylor describes: "Circulation is often not just circulation that you're doing. Often some other technical questions might come up." In these moments, the teaching and learning are spontaneous and impromptu. An attitude of inclusion pervades these situations as well. As Quinn says, "When people ask for directions to go somewhere that may be on a different floor, I always point out both stairs and elevators to every person. You don't make assumptions about whether or not somebody can use the stairs." Striving for an

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inclusive library environment is a collective effort among all librarians and staff in all patron interactions.

Examining the interview data concerning how academic librarians and staff engage with students reveals similarities between their conceptions of difference or diversity and Montiel-Overall's conceptual framework. Both demonstrate librarians' cultural awareness of themselves and others. This understanding is frequently self-directed. The librarians' inward focus helps to mitigate potential microaggressions, the brief, everyday exchanges that belittle, stereotype, or insult those in marginalized groups, often unintentionally.

Individual encounters with diverse students provide librarians and staff valuable opportunities to build cultural competence through personal interactions. The pervasiveness of diversity and inclusion awareness, established during initial training at the undergraduate and main libraries, demonstrates each organization's commitment to best serve all students.

Professional Development: "A Forever Project"

This section explores academic librarians and staff's attendance at and expectations of professional development opportunities.

Participation in Professional Development

Each participant indicated that taking part in professional development opportunities is expected, although none of their supervisors explicitly mandated that they attend such training. Taylor declares, "I've never been told that I have to go to X, Y or Z workshop, but when you're strongly encouraged, it's kind of like you're 'voluntold,' so it's highly encouraged." Riley agrees, saying, "There is sort of a positive pressure. While I haven't ever felt that these opportunities have been mandatory, I think that there's a pervasive culture of engagement and compliance among the permanent staff that comes from people being on board."

These representative excerpts again document the organizational values of the undergraduate and main libraries. In addition to the initial training discussed in the previous section, both the director of the undergraduate library and the head of public services of the main library actively promote and incorporate the principles of diversity and inclusion into ongoing professional development. The undergraduate library strives to integrate such training with other professional development, as the director explains: "We intersperse trainings on all kinds of topics throughout our weekly staff meetings, so the goal is integration. These are all things we need to do our job." In addition to this integrated instruction, the library's permanent staff are encouraged to participate in opportunities offered throughout the university. At the main library, the head of public services reinforces the significance of diversity and inclusion by including "some level of equity and diversity goals in their performance reviews, so that is part of what's expected of them." Connecting these values to performance reviews also adds to the importance of making adequate opportunities for training available to the staff.

At the organizational level, each library has established diversity and inclusion as pervasive values that filter into individual practice. This commitment contributes to

the willing participation of academic librarians and staff in professional development opportunities to improve their skills and abilities. Alex explains,

> My supervisors encourage attending professional development events by endorsing them or sending an e-mail to promote events on campus. Our vice provost may endorse or promote an event that is campus-wide, whereas colleagues that work on library-specific committees are more likely to promote library-wide engagements.

From the initial onboarding of new librarians and staff, through ongoing training organized by each library, to the promotion of professional development opportunities across campus, the undergraduate and main libraries demonstrate their commitment to continued learning, as Montiel-Overall advocates.[38]

Types of Professional Development Opportunities

As diversity has become more comprehensive within the LIS profession, and as student populations have included more learners from different backgrounds, the professional

. . . as student populations have included more learners from different backgrounds, the professional development opportunities available to academic librarians and staff have proliferated and expanded.

development opportunities available to academic librarians and staff have proliferated and expanded. Opportunities regarding diversity have received greater attention in recent years, as the participants confirm. Taylor comments, "Those questions of diversity, maybe earlier in my career were a little bit less so. I didn't really have too much training when I was at my previous position with regards to that. However, I think in more recent years there has been a more concerted effort towards providing those professional development opportunities." Alex agrees, saying, "Yeah, there's been a large emphasis in the last year and a half or so that I've been aware of, with American Indian Studies and different actions by the university to engage more heavily with First Nations information and acknowledgment." Taylor, who has 20 years of experience, confirms the recent attention given to diversity among professional development offerings. Alex speaks to the expanding number of groups that have received attention in such efforts, a broadening of diversity that Semenza, Koury, and Shropshire identify in recent LIS literature.[39]

Participants mentioned various professional development opportunities. In addition to the sessions dedicated to Indigenous populations that Alex describes, all participants have attended training that included general diversity content. Some focused on specific groups. Alex, for example, referred to sessions that concentrated specifically on students from China and the role of culture as it relates to academic library use. Other training centered on pronunciation of Chinese names.

A concentration on pedagogy was not universal in professional development opportunities. Riley mentioned attending sessions with an explicit teaching focus, declaring, "Yeah, I participate in teaching and learning circles, information literacy and instruc-

tional development all the time." Taylor described similar training: "Yeah, I've had a few workshops in that regard. You've got things like universal design and how to be inclusive. I've been involved in workshops about how to include diversity in the context of classroom settings, such as thinking about your search examples and even the way you present material." On the other hand, both Alex and Quinn described workshops with only a tangential relationship to pedagogy. Alex reported, "There was one workshop that was on accessibility and how to create content that is accessible. That was put on by the campus disability resource center about how to create presentations that are accessible. Other than that, I haven't attended anything like that [involving pedagogy]." Quinn said, "None that come to mind explicitly. No, we talk a little bit about feminist pedagogy, but that's it."

As members of an interdisciplinary field and profession, academic librarians and staff come from a variety of educational backgrounds. Apart from their time in library school, librarians may not share similar educational experiences. Library staff, who are not required to have a master's degree, may not have the same training librarians do. For this reason, professional development is important for all academic library staff, regardless of their educational histories. The four participants of this study reflect this educational variety, which may be significant considering the broad conceptualizations of diversity and the framing of engagement with students as moments of teaching and learning. Formal instruction is not part of every academic librarian's or staff member's duties, but all participants describe interactions with students that indicate a need for pedagogical content, methods, and practice.

In relation to Montiel-Overall's conceptual framework, these efforts address the call for continuous learning. Additionally, the frequent and varied initiatives to actively promote diversity and inclusion signify an openness to developing cultural competence at the institutional level, such as the undergraduate and main libraries' participation "in making culture an important part of the ethos of an organization."[40] With regard to training, from the institutional level, both the undergraduate and main libraries clearly engage with diversity initiatives.

As discussed earlier, language is one component of the environmental domain of Montiel-Overall's conceptual framework, addressed here via Alex's training on pronunciation of Chinese names. Such coaching contributes to a climate of inclusion that aims to eliminate discrimination based upon linguistic diversities. Another significant aspect in the environmental domain of Montiel-Overall's conceptual model is an understanding of the information environment. Alex's training focused on Chinese students in the United States attended to how these learners utilize academic library resources. This instruction also contributes to growing cultural competence as academic librarians and staff develop specialized knowledge and understanding of the history, traditions, and values of specific user groups and how they utilize library resources.

Takeaways from Professional Development Opportunities

Each participant related the benefits of the professional development they attended; however, they also mentioned challenges in applying the content to daily practice. A common takeaway all of them mentioned was their realization of the limitations of one-

> **All participants mentioned that diversity and cultural competence work requires continual effort.**

shot sessions. All participants mentioned that diversity and cultural competence work requires continual effort. Alex sums up this sentiment stating, "Yeah, it's something that is going to be a forever project to try to really engage with diversity and do our best to mitigate inequities that happen on our campus every single day." Riley concurs, observing that cultural competence "requires consistent and constant interaction with these ideas in an ever-deepening sort of way." Quinn speaks about adjusting to diversity, stating, "You have to be comfortable being uncomfortable. And the more you do it, then you're just more comfortable being uncomfortable." As these insights from Alex, Riley, and Quinn demonstrate, the value of such training is diminished if one does not make a conscious effort to meaningfully engage with diversity concepts every day. Without making diversity a part of daily work and seeking to continually build cultural competence, the benefits from attending professional development opportunities may be squandered.

A second takeaway that all participants mentioned was that to be most effective, diversity and cultural competence initiatives must be pervasive. Efforts in these areas are less effective when not practiced within a community. As discussed, both the undergraduate and main libraries promote diversity and inclusion from organizational levels, beginning with onboarding of new staff. When the library sets an example from an organizational level, it becomes easier for individual staff members to actively engage with diversity and inclusion,

> **When the library sets an example from an organizational level, it becomes easier for individual staff members to actively engage with diversity and inclusion . . .**

as well as to take advantage of professional development opportunities to build their cultural competence.

Third, participants observed that this work is not easy. Conversations about diversity can be difficult, as can engaging with students from different backgrounds. Additionally, academic librarians and staff have varied duties. Remaining cognizant of cultural impacts in all aspects of their work is a challenge. The need for such efforts, however, is not lost on the participants. As Quinn states, "You have to be aware of how your culture influences the way you behave and to also be aware of the experience of folks who don't have the same cultural background as you." With awareness as the first step, reacting to situations as they arise is step two. Although each participant mentioned the difficulty in moving from training to practice, constantly engaging with diversity as part of their work, along with the promotion of these values from an organizational level, helps alleviate this challenge. Finally, reflection on past interactions allows for personal and professional growth and the ability to build one's cultural competence.

The organizational and professional values of the undergraduate and main libraries align with Montiel-Overall's conceptual framework. Cultural self-awareness, which came up in the interviews, speaks directly to a key tenet of the framework's cognitive domain. Additionally, participants' discussion of thinking deeply about principles maps

to reflecting on values, a component of the interpersonal domain. As librarians and staff move from awareness to reflection, they consider the role of their individual values, as well as those of the patrons they serve, all within the institutional principles of the library in which they work.[41] Through this reflection process, they either confirm that their values are put into action or, if not, they work to improve or reevaluate the situation.

Discussion and Implications

This study focused on two research questions: (1) How do academic librarians and staff conceptualize diversity and difference based upon their engagement with organizational diversity initiatives and experience interacting with diverse students? and (2) How do these conceptualizations affect their service as they consider the significance of diversity in their work? Although participants mentioned various forms of diversity, they most prominently discussed racial diversity.

Predominantly and historically white institutions of higher education in the United States have espoused the significance of diversity and promoted diversity initiatives.[42] Academic libraries, as constituents within larger organizations, are not entirely autonomous and must adhere to institutional policies, principles, and missions.[43] Libraries are under pressure to demonstrate their value and align their goals and missions with those of their parent institutions. However, primarily and historically white educational institutions have racist and colonial roots. As such, they may perpetuate systemic racism, discrimination deeply embedded within societal structures that disadvantage marginalized groups, especially people of color. When primarily and historically white institutions operate within a colonial paradigm, originally intended to serve white (male) elites, they sustain social inequalities and inequities.[44] On a smaller scale, individual campus units, including academic libraries, continually confront these legacies, facing the choice to either disrupt or reinforce systemic racism.

Despite ongoing efforts, librarianship remains a largely white profession, with 86.7 percent of ALA members identifying as white in 2017 and 86.1 percent of higher education credentialed librarians describing themselves as white as of the 2010 fiscal year.[45] Freeda Brook, Dave Ellenwood, and Althea Lazzaro connect the systemic racism of higher education and the lack of diversity in the LIS profession in their discussion of academic libraries, where, they say, a culture of whiteness prevails.[46] The three authors argue that this culture exists at individual and organizational levels and presents itself in various ways, including monocultural (that is, white) geography and spaces, organizational hiring practices, and traditional tenets of reference service delivery. As U.S. institutions of higher education become increasingly diverse, the demographics of academic librarianship have changed more slowly, due in part to the smaller number of people of color who obtain the required credentials and degrees, as well as challenges in recruiting and retaining librarians from different backgrounds.[47] Together, systemic racism, the whiteness of librarianship, and

> **Together, systemic racism, the whiteness of librarianship, and a diversifying student population underscore the relevance of, and need for, ongoing diversity-focused professional development.**

a diversifying student population underscore the relevance of, and need for, ongoing diversity-focused professional development.

Although the undergraduate and main libraries in this study have demonstrated a commitment to diversity initiatives and have promoted professional development opportunities, these efforts cannot overcome the whiteness of academic librarianship. Academic libraries, within their parent institutions, are couched in a historically oppressive paradigm that naturalizes whiteness and is reflected in service delivery, staffing, and values. Confronting whiteness requires a new way of thought that "works in and through difference in all of its difficulty and creative potential."[48] Montiel-Overall argues that "there is a critical need to develop cultural competence among LIS professionals to address social, linguistic and academic needs of culturally diverse individuals."[49] Greater levels of cultural competence among academic librarians and staff will increase the effectiveness of service to all students and begin to address the powerful legacies of whiteness that persist within historically white institutions.

The recruitment and retention of librarians and library staff of color remain significant issues confronting the profession.[50] The lack of diversity may deter prospective LIS professionals from pursuing careers in the field. The ALA recognizes the significance of workforce diversity and calls for recruitment, training, and development programs to increase and retain library personnel from a variety of backgrounds.[51] Studies have indicated that nonwhite students make frequent use of academic libraries and resources.[52] Brenton Stewart, Boryung Ju, and Kaetrena Kendrick's work suggests that the whiteness of academic libraries does not seem to negatively affect nonwhite students.[53] However, Jennifer Bonnet and Benjamin McAlexander, in their study of librarian approachability, propose that a more diverse pool of academic librarians might better serve racially underrepresented students. Such diversity, they say, "has the potential to not only contribute to positive perceptions of the campus climate, but also to the library services intended to meet the needs of all library users."[54]

> The recruitment and retention of librarians and library staff of color remain significant issues confronting the profession.

Considering the larger societal issues of inequity and inequality that penetrate higher education, collective individual change requires dedicated perseverance, in combination with organizational commitments to diversity and inclusion. Academic libraries, as entities within institutions of higher education, must confront systemic societal issues, along with the structures that dominate academic librarianship itself. As members of a predominantly white profession, librarians and staff have a responsibility to engage in the difficult task of combating structural inequity and inequality. Changing the culture of academic libraries is possible via self-awareness, the foundational element of Montiel-Overall's conceptual framework. Self-awareness is a prerequisite of self-reflection. Elizabeth Foster calls for reflective practice in library instruction.[55] Based upon the analysis presented here, the researcher recommends expanding Foster's call to include reflective practice in all aspects of academic librarianship. Concerted efforts that attend to cultural competence can begin to address these issues within the profession; however, as an institution, academic libraries must actively address structural inequities.

Libraries, academic or otherwise, can no longer hide behind the façade of neutrality or refrain from vigorously engaging in efforts to confront systemic inequities and injustices.[56]

Each participant in the interviews analyzed here conceptualized academic libraries as sites of teaching and learning and framed their interactions with students in this way, confirming James Elmborg's call to teach at the desk and Scott Walter's exploration of librarians embracing a teacher identity.[57] The extent to which participants received pedagogical training varied, however. There is a need for more robust professional development that focuses exclusively on teaching. More specifically, in relation to diversity and cultural competence, there is a need for training in such teaching methods as Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, Gloria Ladson-Billings' culturally relevant pedagogy, Geneva Gay's culturally responsive teaching, and Django Paris and H. Samy Alim's culturally sustaining pedagogy.[58] As Eamon Tewell argues, asset-based approaches confront the deficit models that underlie library instruction.[59] Academic libraries must collaborate with appropriate campus partners in offering adequate training and professional development to academic librarians and library staff.

> **Libraries, academic or otherwise, can no longer hide behind the façade of neutrality or refrain from vigorously engaging in efforts to confront systemic inequities and injustices.**

Each participant mentioned the benefits of professional development opportunities regarding diversity; however, they also observed that moving from training to practice is a challenge. As Alice Cruz states, "True commitment to diversity requires more than one-time compliance with hiring mandates, or a single presentation of diversity-themed programming."[60] Strategic planning and assessment are key, but how does evaluation of long-term changes over time—revisions to one's values, attitudes, and disposition that are not easily measured or quantified—reliably occur? While beyond the scope of the present study, future work exploring the assessment of genuine and authentic change, the true commitment that Cruz discusses, would provide valuable insight into diversity initiatives at the organizational level, as well as individuals' cultural competence.

As participants' remarks indicate, diversity training and professional development opportunities are common; however, based upon the present study, these offerings often fail to bridge the gap between scholarly or professional discourse and putting these concepts into practice. The undergraduate and main libraries in this study create atmospheres in which diversity is clearly valued and demonstrate this belief during initial onboarding and throughout employment. This environment provides an opportunity for these and other academic libraries to more fully leverage and integrate professional resources, including the guidelines from the joint Building Cultural Proficiencies for Racial Equity Task Force when they become available. Academic libraries can draw on these and other resources for in-house training, workshops, and other professional development opportunities (see Appendix C).

Conclusion

In this article, the researcher utilized Montiel-Overall's conceptual framework for cultural competence to explore such knowledge and abilities among academic librarians and staff. Engaging with diversity and seeking to improve one's cultural competence are challenges that all in the profession, regardless of their background, must confront. At the individual level, building cultural competence begins with cultural awareness of self and others. Recognizing the ways our culturally informed values manifest in practice and affect patrons with whom we interact allows for the attainment of higher levels of cultural competence. In examining staff training, the significance of organizational involvement and commitment from individual librarians and staff became apparent. Pervasive organizational cultures contribute to the facilitation of individual growth and development. While professional development opportunities are valuable for academic librarians and staff, the researcher argues for more focused offerings, particularly those with a pedagogical emphasis, to reflect the role of academic libraries as sites of teaching and learning. As the recently created ALA Building Cultural Proficiencies for Racial Equity Framework Task Force demonstrates, cultural competence is a significant topic in the LIS profession. As higher education increasingly diversifies but academic librarianship remains primarily white, it is vital that academic librarians and staff engage meaningfully with diversity and continually develop their cultural competence to better serve all students.

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Appendix A

Brief Participant Information

	Position	Library	Years of service	Educational background	MLIS (Y/N)	Ethnicity
Alex	Library services assistant-advanced	Main	2	Psychology	N	White, non-Hispanic
Quinn	Academic librarian	Undergraduate	14	English and social welfare	Y	White, non-Hispanic
Riley	Academic librarian	Undergraduate	13	History (religious studies and anthropology)	Y	White, non-Hispanic
Taylor	Academic librarian	Main	20	English literature	Y	White, non-Hispanic

*Names of participants have been changed.

Appendix B

Codebook

I. Engagement with students
    1. Public service (e.g., circulation)
    2. Reference interactions (in-person or virtual)
    3. Formal instruction sessions

II. Job duties
    1. Public facing (i.e., involves direct patron interaction)
        a) Circulation
        b) Reference
        c) Formal instruction sessions
        d) Serendipitous (e.g., passing patrons in stacks, halls, lobbies, etc.)
    2. Non-public facing (i.e., does not involve direct patron interaction)
        a) Meetings
        b) Committees
        c) Collection development
        d) Budgeting
        e) Staff supervision
        f) Student worker supervision
    3. Difference and diversity
        a) Implicit bias
        b) In-moment acknowledgment and effects on practice
        c) Reflection and effects on practice
    4. On-job training opportunities
        a) Onboarding/initial training
        b) Ongoing opportunities (e.g., staff meetings)
    5. Professional development opportunities
        a) Type
            (1) Diversity (general)
            (2) Diversity (specific)
            (3) Pedagogical components
        b) Location
            (1) In-house opportunities
            (2) Campus-wide opportunities
            (3) Professional conferences
        c) Takeaways
            (1) Ongoing
            (2) Process (awareness, action, reflection)
            (3) Challenges
            (4) Implementation

Appendix C

Selected Frameworks, Guidelines, and Standards

Library and Information Science

ACRL/ARL/ODLOS/PLA (Association of College and Research Libraries/Association of Research Libraries/American Library Association Office for Diversity, Literacy and Outreach Services/Public Library Association). "Building Cultural Proficiencies for Racial Equity Framework Task Force."

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