# How a Global Pandemic and Racial Unrest Are Impacting Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Work in Research Libraries

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Perhaps stated too often is the reflection that 2020 has brought unprecedented challenges and uncertainties to the communities served by research libraries and beyond. The convergence of the global COVID-19 pandemic with the sequence of police killings of unarmed Black citizens in the US and the resulting protests may be fueling dramatic shifts in perspectives about societal structures that create acute vulnerabilities for communities of color and other marginalized populations. Facing a new reality where face-to-face contact is impossible in almost any context, practitioners in research libraries across the US and Canada whose work is focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are dealing with the realities of having to conduct their work in a dramatically different way, along with shifting views and heightened interests in the issues for which they are charged to lead. Below, three DEI practitioners offer their reflections on the impact of these events on their work, in response to a series of questions posed for this article.

**Mark A. Puente:** The last several months have brought unexpected and dramatic changes to the way research libraries and archives

operate. Through a diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) lens, what has been most challenging about dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, and with the racial awakening and unrest that we are experiencing?

**Maha Kumaran:** Work-wise, for me, reaching out to distributed (distance) students has been a priority and challenge. They are already shy about reaching out to libraries. Technology is a huge issue for many in terms of access. Faculty are often the conduit for these students but, with fewer classes in spring and summer, faculty are not in touch with me. International students, especially those who are new to Canada are experiencing major challenges. There are many implications for added costs (such as internet access from home) for those students. Curbside pick-up of library materials is one way to address this, but not everyone has access to physical resources. Anyone doing field research is being impacted, especially those studying marginalized populations. It is harder to reach these populations.

**Jeff Witt:** The most challenging thing for us at Michigan is that, before we went to 100% remote work, we had laid the groundwork for doing a deep exploration into organizational culture and climate within the libraries. Most of that work is now stalled. I had just received a report on a focus group we conducted regarding the experience of people of color (POC) employees in the library. We have a similar report from 25 years ago to compare. We had just received the new report and organized a group within the libraries to look at it and make recommendations right before COVID-19 hit. The pandemic also interrupted our work on organizational culture. We were so excited that we had the support of the dean for the work. We are just now getting comfortable with working in this new way, and now we are ramping up the work again. Right now we are working through a process of very limited reentry. We polled students and researchers to get a sense about what services are most critical to their experience...the library services that need to happen within the building and thinking about staffing. Our services will be

very limited and completely opt in. We are getting back to the racial equity work we started previously with a focus on what is going on in the US and globally. We jump-started the effort by hosting an all-staff meeting that was focused completely on race equity. At that event, we rolled out the new report. The dean and the associate university librarians (AULs) were vulnerable, recognizing that more work needs to be done. It was exactly what the organization needed. The administration took some hits in terms of the honesty of the feedback, but they were well prepared for that. The administration is fully willing to admit that we've not done enough.

**Twanna Hodge:** I think I'm in a unique situation because I just started this position five weeks before the stay-at-home order went into effect. I didn't have the opportunity to get to know the libraries in-depth in-person before we went remote. Since then, I have been working from home. Because I am new to the position and because this is an inaugural position, there is much that I have to learn and figure out. The most challenging part of dealing with the stay-at-home order for most institutions was finding work, especially for the frontline staff, working from home, virtually, or still on campus, maintaining support for research and curricula needs, and determining who will be on campus (short-term and long-term) in terms of facilities personnel, etc. All-staff town halls were scheduled weekly to communicate timely information. In regards to COVID-19, much of it is about determining how to work from home without creating new silos. That was the biggest challenge within the first month. We can't provide the same level of service. How do we manage to continue supporting an R1 institution during a pandemic? Regarding the racial inequities, a lot of education is needed about the catalyst for the recent murders that led to the current and recent demonstrations and protests. People are learning about structural oppression and white supremacy. It was an awakening in terms of dealing with this and, simultaneously, with the pandemic. It was eye-opening to work with the employees to create statements and other ways to support BIPOC employees and patrons. One of the

most challenging things is being a Black woman facilitating these conversations as the diversity, equity, and inclusion librarian. How does one do that in a productive way, where people will not shut down or double down? This has been especially hard given my newness in the position.

**Puente:** How has the "work from home" order impacted your DEI work, either for your institution or for the work in general?

**Kumaran:** We are experiencing the same challenges with respect to technology solutions. I updated my Wi-Fi, but calls do get dropped and meetings freeze. People are impacted by the issues around them. (For example, if they have family affected by the pandemic.) DEI work has always been part of my research. I continue to do this in terms of facilitating conversations while not being there in person with others where I might need to be. Our library has started conversations about anti-racism in two-streams: one that focuses on anti-racism learning and another on an anti-racism approach. Learning is only the first step, approach will take us to the next level—actions. The approaches and conversations could get difficult. Our interim dean is taking the lead in these efforts. I am also working as the visiting program officer for the Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL) to lead their EDI initiatives. Luckily, our monthly meetings were always online, so this work continued with minor interruptions or changes.

**Witt:** I am still the interim director of Human Resources. We hired a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) program manager, Thomas Dickens. Thomas and I took a look at the plan for DEI and accessibility work. He initiated the implementation of the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI)[1] in response to the focus group report. We first implemented the IDI for middle managers (individualized work) and now we are doing one-on-one coaching sessions with them. We are using administrators of the IDI from across the campus to administer to the library. We have shifted other things from in-person to online, for example, our safe-space training has changed as well as our brave-space conversations.

We are using Zoom video technologies to continue the work. We started with conversations around COVID (part of our conversations around safe spaces), and continued with programs on the experiences of Black and Asian people in light of COVID. These programs were well attended. Perhaps we didn't have enough representation (space) for POC employees within the organization. We are now looking at ways to reframe that as an action of an affinity group. We are hoping to create a brave space for white people looking at anti-racist practices. We are taking full advantage of positive energy around racial equity right now. DEI is not the same as race equity work. We can become too complacent, patting ourselves on the back about DEI.

**Hodge:** The pandemic has brought to light many things in terms of peoples' capacity to be engaged. We had a lot of work in the queue. There was a lag in terms of my engagement with the institution, as I became adjusted to the new position. We (the world collectively, institutions, and individuals) didn't have a week or any time to adapt to this new reality. I was lucky enough to have a workspace at home and only needed a few modifications. Now work has invaded my home sanctuary, so there goes the work/life separation that I was trying to establish. In a pre-COVID-19 time, it was easier to have that separation or the illusion of it. Now I can very easily work until 9:00 p.m. or get up at 1:00 a.m. to work if I choose to do so. This has disrupted my scholarship, as well. The pandemic has brought to light some things that might not have surfaced for weeks or months, such as the faculty/staff divide on our campus and the freedom and protections that some have as opposed to others. Also, the level of surveillance that some experience is problematic. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of frequent communications across the organization, but primarily to staff. It has allowed us to streamline communications to all levels of the organization. One of the biggest things that COVID has surfaced is the disparity in how employees, based on their status/rank/position, receive communication and provide input.

**Puente:** In what way have these major challenges changed your perspectives about how we approach DEI work?

**Kumaran:** I feel that there is more urgency from everyone, but my concern is that DEI work becomes a fad again. We should not undertake this work only due to the events happening around us. In terms of approaching DEI work, I was reflecting on the book *Engaging the Six Cultures of the Academy* by Bergquist and Pawlak. It provides a history of how different institutions in Canada (and the US) came about. One of the premises of the book is that managerial culture wants to ensure that resources are spent wisely, and that resources (human and monetary) are managed and controlled. I think DEI should be one of the core cultures of the academy, the first culture. And all other cultures should be viewed from the DEI culture perspective.

**Witt:** We are experiencing a cognitive shift: from DEI to race equity work. These two experiences have exposed the weaknesses or fallacies of DEI work, especially at a predominantly white institution like Michigan. Framing the work as "DEI" can help us avoid doing the really hard work of race equity. More folks are understanding/realizing that true social justice is really uncomfortable. Much of the DEI work is "feel good" work. Social justice work churns up all kinds of emotions…it is not "feel good" work. We are finding that more folks in the library are capable of living in that discomfort, which is a positive thing. Our AULs have been more open to exploring and seeing the impact of systemic racism. Our organization, especially leadership, is starting to recognize how white supremacy plays out at work. We are also focusing this work in library publishing.

**Hodge:** Instead of talking about microaggressions and biases, the conversations and actions have shifted to racism, especially eradicating anti-Black racism. The work has changed to having conversations about underlying structural inequities, institutional racism, etc. From an operational standpoint, how is this embedded

into the workflows, communication, daily practice, assessment strategies for our employees and those they serve? As the fall semester is ending and the spring semester approaches, how are we considering the impact and effect of providing services to people and how is that different depending on their role, identities (visible and invisible), and status in the workplace? I am finding that more people are willing to talk about whiteness, white supremacy, and even colonialism and decolonization. It is a much-needed and required shift in mindset and focus.

**Puente:** As our institutions and associations attempt to move forward, some with reopening (at least to some degree), and surely almost all looking at significant financial implications, how can we best advocate for DEI efforts? What might that look like?

**Kumaran:** We have to make DEI work part of academic culture. We have to go beyond collecting knowledge resources. We have to concentrate on activity and build accountability. Many people from minority cultures are not asked to collaborate with researchers. How do we change that? We have to stop thinking about DEI as a separate entity. It needs to be part and parcel of everything we do. Our policies and planning need to be more inclusive and accommodating, and not just building rooms for breast-feeding or for prayers. We have to think about how inequity is built into things like our recruitment, collaborations, and promotion & tenure process. We have to ensure that Indigenous ways of knowing and learning are part of academic inquiry.

**Witt:** There will be significant differences in the way the budget will be used. We are under a hiring freeze, so there won't be lots of opportunities in terms of bringing in new people. There will be many implications and our ways of doing this work may be more limited in the future. Our strategy is to get the dean's commitment to racial equity work. This year will focus on this. In order to be effective we have to be that specific and identify specific goals. It will help us not get sidetracked. The work has already started. Our

dean put a stake in the ground: provided a laundry list of a half dozen things that the administration will commit to in the next year. We had an existing strategic plan and we plan to review the plan every year and modify the goals for year five, expressly using the lens of racial equity. We will work at modifying the goal through a race equity lens. We know it is a lofty goal, but it will make a difference. We have to go big.

**Hodge:** It is connecting DEI efforts to the mission, vision, strategic plan/goals of the institution and embedding DEI in daily practice. In 2016 the University of Florida shared a plan called "The Decade Ahead" that includes an objective of, "A university climate that is inclusive, supportive, and respectful to all."[2] Training on racism, inclusion, and bias is needed. Is the institution ready to support this work? Do they have the necessary resources? Are we prepared to shift to take action about systemic inequities? Are we prepared for conversations about anti-Blackness and anti-Indigeneity? The library is the heart of the campus. Do we have the resources and mechanisms to support this level of discourse and action? Are people ready to help researchers finding resources on white hegemony or white fragility? Now is the time to think about making equitable cuts where cuts occur. What is the impact on DEI priorities and the ability to support those priorities, when cuts are made? If positions are cut, what percentage of those folks will be BIPOC? How do we dismantle and rebuild systems so that they are built for everyone (BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, persons with disabilities, etc.)? We must be able to connect these adjustments to our fundamental mission and values. How do we move towards a future where people don't feel tokenized or just a representative of their culture or identity?

**Puente:** Are there efforts that we might devise and create across institutions, associations, or even across respective countries, that might help us better meet the demands of our profession and our societies in the DEI arena? How might we make those happen?

**Kumaran:** All institutions need to talk to each other about these issues. At this point we don't. What are we already doing? What do we want to accomplish and how will we do it? Libraries need to reach out to American Library Association (ALA)–accredited institutions in other countries. I don't think it would hurt for us to reach out to international communities to recruit practitioners. The master of library and information science (MLIS) is still an expectation for professional employment in Canadian libraries, and while we need standards, we also need to look into hiring experienced practitioners from non-ALA-accredited programs. Perhaps they will need to take a few courses or have some sort of accreditation that acknowledges their education and experience from other countries. Enable them to apply for jobs here.

**Witt:** At Michigan, we have been talking about what type of help we as an organization need from the profession. We need help understanding the notion of systems (such as white supremacy). We have leaders who can better recognize how those systems perpetuate inequity. We need to understand how to identify, dismantle, and rebuild systems. It's inevitable that there will be pushback, internally. We need help from the outside to facilitate those conversations and to help us conduct a "systems" analysis.

**Hodge:** There are efforts occurring and being devised in libraries and librarianship; for example, I had the opportunity to present on institutional racism in libraries and librarianship for a different institution. Through our professional connections, we can do cross-institutional work. Some organizations, like the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL), through their Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Committee, provide opportunities to collaborate with others. The Association of Southeastern Research

Libraries (ASERL) is another example and created DEI task forces, one focused on recruitment and one focused on retention. ACRL, ARL, ALA's Office for Diversity, Literacy and Outreach Services, and the Public Library Association formed the Building Cultural Proficiencies for Racial Equity Framework Task Force.[3] The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) is another example, as is the work that National Associations of Librarians of Color (NALCo) are doing in engaging and supporting library staff of color. There is a lot of infrastructure that already exists. So we need to (start or further) connect, collaborate, create, document, disseminate, assess, and rinse and repeat. Sometimes, you need to experiment, take risks, launch something and see how things work. For example, the BIPOC in LIS Mental Health Summit offered this spring came out of conversations in other spaces, not necessarily institutions. Being able to host the summit proves that we can work both within and outside existing (hierarchal) structures and institutions. I agree wholeheartedly with Kumaran and Witt. Additionally we and many others who do this work need consistent support and investment (time, resources, folks' willingness to push beyond discomfort or pain) from our organizations, the associations, and the profession.

**Puente:** Many thought-leaders and practitioners who do this work talk about dismantling and recreating systems. What comes to mind when we speak of those systems and which, if any, are the ones directly related to libraries, archives, information, and cultural heritage organizations?

**Kumaran:** This will require that we reimagine what libraries mean, particularly academic libraries. Academic libraries were established within dominant culture and developed out of the white foundational figures. What would the library look like for Indigenous/Black populations to feel comfortable within them? What would it take for the dominant cultures to accept the underrepresented perspectives? There is a lot of work to do in terms

of content and access. Digitization could help with some of this, although access could still be a problem. Inclusion is needed at all levels in librarianship including leadership.

**Witt:** We've been having conversations with folks about these systems. We've had conversations with university publishers about how to set up authors of color to be successful—editors, marketing, distribution. We recognize that we don't have the data to know where we are. We need to create a platform to gather that information. Thinking about collections, we have to focus on decolonization…drawing out problematic parts of the collection, such as *Robinson Crusoe*. And then we build programming around that theme, creating a platform for anti-racism and anti-colonialism. We need to look at recruiting/hiring, especially at the leadership level. We need to look at how we develop talent within the organization. Succession planning is important but we have to analyze who gets picked as the emerging talent and who gets left out? Where are future talent pools? Now is exactly the right time to dismantle our hiring processes and our developmental strategies. It is easier to dismantle a system that we're not actively using.

**Hodge:** We need further critiquing of professional credentialing (the barriers associated with it), gatekeeping that occurs, and vocational awe embedded in librarianship. We need to examine the things related to culture that impact librarianship. For example, what's taught in LIS programs about the contribution of BIPOC library workers? I didn't learn about E.J. Josey, civil rights activist and one of the founders of the Black Caucus of ALA (BCALA), until my last quarter of library school. To my knowledge, LIS programs offer no systemic education for LIS professionals in training on racial identity, power and privilege, and their impacts on interpersonal relationships, collection development services, and programming. There are no curriculum-based or focused discussions about ethnic caucuses. For a profession working for so long on diversification of its workforce, we have not done a

successful job. To enter the profession, you need to get a degree from an ALA-accredited institution. How many HBCUs, tribal colleges or universities, or Hispanic-serving institutions have LIS programs? For the folks we are recruiting into the profession, are they entering work environments where their authentic selves are celebrated? We need to work at countering librarian archetypes and stereotypes. What are effective retention strategies? How are we supporting mid-career and advanced career BIPOC library staff? We need to rethink the admissions process for LIS programs. There are so many barriers; for example, someone might need to have experience (work, volunteer, etc.) in archives and special collections even before applying to or starting a graduate program with that specialization. We need to eliminate the practice of unpaid internships. We need to reexamine funding for and costs of the MLIS, and the pay structures for graduate student workers, library staff, and early career librarians, based on race, gender, rank, etc. The general public and those in senior positions of power (outside of librarianship) typically do not understand or value the work that library workers do; they hold many misconceptions about librarianship that affects budgets, workload, and more. As Kumaran and Witt have referenced leadership, access to leadership positions are viable for a few and those who are already in the profession or have relevant doctoral degrees.

**Puente:** When we talk about recreating a desired, more equitable future, what do you envision that will look like? What do you think it will take to get us there?

**Kumaran:** We're not at that point yet (in terms of envisioning). We need to have conversations first. We need time to get over the hurt and start to listen and then act. Institutions need to stop saying they are committed to the work and start doing the work. Dialogue is happening. Policies and processes have to be put in place to prevent us from dropping off DEI when it's no longer a fad.

**Witt:** We need to continue to recognize that our traditional DEI and accessibility (DEIA) work needs to become foundational—just the way we operate. This creates a space for us to pursue social justice more. We create more time and space for substantive conversations when DEIA is baked in. What we're building is a culture dedicated to social justice. We talk alot about representation, but we need to get to a point where we have a critical mass of POC working in our profession. If people feel isolated or tokenized they will not trust the work. Also, born-accessible materials should be leveraged as we create and innovate. Reaching our accessibility and access goals is still too much of an afterthought. How are people going to gain access?

**Hodge:** The desired future is almost the opposite of what is the current reality. It is being able to go to any library program and see faculty and administrators of color, to see a multitude of identities (Black, Afro-Caribbean, trans, immigrant,female, etc.) reflected in the curriculum. It is that the lives and experiences of BIPOC colleagues are valued, and experiences, knowledge, and research are reflected in K–12 and higher education. It is that the preservation and support of Black and Indigenous life are interwoven into the systems and structures. It is to be seen as an individual and not a representation of any identities. It is that a position like mine is obsolete due to the reality of inclusive, anti-racist, equtiable workplaces. How can we thrive together as a society, where universal design comes naturally? Where people are not judged for their skin color, or not preferencing those who are younger? Work environments where respectability politics, "culture of niceness," conflict avoidance, passive-aggressiveness, or whiteness aren't the standard or expected norm. Difference is celebrated. People can be who they are without choosing which parts of themselves they need to mask or make more palatable to fit into a society. Paraphrasing a speaker, it is hard to envision something that doesn't exist. Let's start envisioning and then get to work. Anti-racism, equity, and inclusion don't happen suddenly; they take time, resources, life-long learning, and dedication.

**Puente:** What do you think will be the most effective strategies for keeping DEI issues at the forefront of our practice and profession, even in these challenging times?

**Kumaran:** Talking about it. It doesn't have to be a bad event that instigates these conversations. People need to be embedding conversation about DEI in teaching, learning, and research. There will always be someone fresh. Make ongoing DEI training mandatory for all employees. Develop and implement pre-tests/post-tests to gauge what people are getting out of it. Include DEI in promotion and tenure standards for accountability purposes.

**Witt:** We need approaches that are more humanistic than scientific... what's really made a difference here is that we've recently had a dean and associate dean who were willing to step out in front of the organization and say, "I've not done enough." They opened themselves up to critical review. People are saying, "You're not doing this right," and we have to be open to the message. Deans, by stepping into that space have allowed some voices to be heard who have not been heard before. By being that vulnerable, that open to criticism, we build trust. People from marginalized groups have the agency to say how these things affect their experience in the organization.

**Hodge:** We have to tie this work to lives and livelihoods. How do we connect this work to the people's jobs and what they care about and think about why this needs to be done? We say we want a fair and just society, but are we willing to do the lifelong work to make that happen? We need to develop communities of practice to share strategies, data, information, and assessment tips. It's having metrics and benchmarking and tying it into what people care about, the institutional mission, vision, and strategic plan. Furthermore, centering the work and connecting it to all decision-making— leadership and middle management involvement, time for processing and reflection, professional development support for continuing education, etc. There is a cost to this, and no one is winning.

**Puente:** Is there anything that I've missed today? Is there anything that it's important to communicate to leaders who want practical strategies for supporting DEI work now and into the future?

**Kumaran:** Listen, engage, participate, act. Leaders cannot do everything, but they need to consider who would be best positioned to do this work. Think about whether it is appropriate to ask BIPOC employees to engage or not. Where else from the organization can there be leaders? Maybe libraries can take the lead in these efforts, beyond collections and resources—going back to reimagining.

Promising exemplars include the Canadian Health Libraries Association. People are doing anti-racist work. This needs to be done for the right reason, by the right people. The Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL) released its *Competencies for Librarians in Canadian Research Libraries* in September and DEI is a big part of the new competencies. DEI is important in a system-wide context. More and more conversations are happening...we have to find a way to sustain these conversations. More and more underrepresented librarians are engaging in these conversations. Either through research, conference presentations and publications, and other platforms. But sometimes we are preaching to the choir, it is the same people who do this work, participate in these events. How do we convince everyone that this is important?

**Witt:** Thinking about, and working on, laying a foundation of stick-to-it-ness. How do we avoid the traps of being polarized and immobilized? Moving into social justice is really difficult. Asking people to move into a space that is deeply uncomfortable when we don't know how to do it yet. Librarians tend to need to do it right...we refuse to step out onto the stage until it's perfect; we have to learn how to let go of perfectionism and build trust. Be ready to fail over and over again, be ready to be uncomfortable. That actually helps build trust. If our colleagues have the trust to tell us when we're messing up, then I need to be appreciative of that trust and call it a win: people are willing to tell me how they are engaging in the hard stuff.

**Hodge:** We need to be failing forward, embracing the fact that we'll make mistakes. We need to work on emotional intelligence (EQ) and conflict resolution skills. We don't get to opt-out or turn away, and there are no options to pick and choose what is essential. If we want to have an equitable, anti-racist profession, we need to think about what led us here—to this point. My interpretation of the concept of Sankofa—is going back to the past to understand it, gaining information from different perspectives, which will lead to progress in the future. We must look at that knowledge to create the future that we all need and deserve. This is something that we'll be working on constantly. This is a lifelong marathon that everyone needs to be engaging in.

We need to be willing to make small steps, understanding that we'll want to pause, but we can't stop. This is a movement towards being vulnerable, honest, open-minded, actively listening, and making space for painful, frustrating, traumatizing, and demoralizing hard truths and lived experiences. We need to make more space, time, and consistent financial support for these conversations. We have to be willing to give up power, temporarily or permanently. We must be open to the discomfort, pain, complicated emotions, and messiness this entails. We are fighting for civil and human rights. At the end of the day, we should be able to say that libraries are a place for everyone and not a place that accentuates intergenerational trauma. We need to be mindful of the emotional labor that BIPOC experience and create a future where deauthentication is an experience of the past. We need to create a future where all humans are seen as human and are treated with human dignity and respect.

## Endnotes

1.  Intercultural Development Inventory website, accessed November 23, 2020, https://idiinventory.com/.

2.  University of Florida, "The Decade Ahead," 2016, https://www.uff.ufl.edu/wp/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/goal-setting-brochure-2016.pdf.

3.  Mark A. Puente, "ACRL, ARL, ODLOS, PLA Announce Joint Cultural Competencies Task Force," Association of Research Libraries, May 20, 2020, https://www.arl.org/news/acrl-arl-odlos-pla-announce-joint-cultural-competencies-task-force/.

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