

Impressions from a Former ARL LCDP Fellow of the Pandemons Class

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The Plan

As I start to write this article, I recall a quote from Napoleon Hill, American author, stating, “Strength and growth come only through continuous effort and struggle.” When I applied to the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) Leadership and Career Development Program (LCDP) at the end of 2019, I was dreaming of an opportunity to improve myself professionally and to discover new approaches to contribute to the growth of my own institution by learning what it takes to be an ARL organization.

I was to be the only fellow participating in the 2020–21 cohort as a non-ARL organization member. I was ready for the challenge and the opportunity to visit in person institutions like the University of British Columbia in Vancouver and Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. Also, there was going to be a lot to learn from The Pandemons class and its home institutions.

Eager to learn, I attended the ARL LCDP orientation session March 4–6, 2020, in Washington, D.C. This is the last normal trip and conference I can remember. I am fond of having the privilege to interact with all involved in the program and being able to share experiences, spaces, and meals without fear. I recall leaving the orientation session so excited to start the training and enthusiastic to reunite with my cohort in the summer of 2020 at the University of British Columbia.

The ARL LCDP

The program pre-pandemic was described as a yearlong fellowship that aims to prepare mid-career librarians from historically

underrepresented racial and ethnic groups to take on leadership roles in their careers and in the profession at large.¹ Unexpected to us was the importance the program would have after the inception of the pandemic, social unrest initiated by the tragic murder of George Floyd, and the turbulent Trump years at the end of his presidency.

Instead, the program's sessions, institutional visits, and mentorship transferred to online venues. All stakeholders had to adapt to finding new ways to provide meaningful programming and resources. Migrating to originally unintended platforms took time to implement, and the ARL LCDP for the Pandemons was extended to 18 months. The program leaders provided flexibility to replan events, to reschedule, and to seek feedback from fellows and partners to adjust to the unmistakably changing climate. Resiliency is the best word to describe membership in this program as we all—fellows, mentors, program administrators, and institutions—had to adjust to new approaches for delivering agreed resources and services.

It was clear to me that although there were stated objectives to achieve during the program, this was indeed a new experience in which ability to adapt, to regroup, and to redirect were essentials for succeeding in the program and throughout the almost two-year pandemic.

The Unthinkable

What is a fellow to do under these changing circumstances? One of the first resources created by the Pandemons was a Slack channel through which we communicated about projects and held informal conversations. This was a much-needed space when feeling the isolation and the mental stresses from the pandemic, and the sudden move from in-person to virtual demand for services in March of 2020.

Unintended consequences during these challenging times were the furloughs and changes in leadership across institutions in the first pandemic year, along with the impact that reduction of personnel, leadership transitions, and demand for more online platforms had on

the new, driven-to-learn ARL LCDP fellows.

2021 ARL Fall Meeting

As we successfully completed our training, we were invited to attend and participate in the 2021 ARL Fall Meeting. Some of the central topics during this meeting were activating physical spaces of research libraries; pursuing truth, reconciliation, and transformation; and leading through disruption and change.² These three topics highlighted concerns raised by galleries, libraries, archives, and museums (GLAM) organizations while attempting to adjust and to deliver services during two very challenging calendar years.

Collaborating on the fall meeting meant that my cohort was going to participate with a broader community in which administrators, mentors, and fellows would share lived experiences intended to enhance understanding, cultural proficiencies, and strategizing about discovering more intentional methods for dismantling systemic barriers in our organizations.

One of the main sessions I participated in during the fall meeting was “Transformation in This Time of Disruption,” held on October 6, 2021. Some of the points raised during the presentation were recognition of the Pandemons’ unique experiences and how those experiences were informed by the disruption and trials of the previous year. We were to share with attendees our reflections on what worked and did not work for us.

The first conversation emerged from reflecting on takeaways from the program. I shared that community and confidence were two takeaways from my personal experience. Community because during 2020, most of us had questions about the future of our profession and our own organizations. After the George Floyd tragedy, most of us were asked to contribute to diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) efforts at a higher level. Although this might have seemed like a proper request at the time, the cohort was already facing the pandemic trials;

adding the emotional stresses from implementing DEIA work required having a community of peers. It was comforting to be able to have this group and to have the confidence to ask any questions related to the pandemic, social unrest, furloughs, etc. Confidence because the cohort built it by confirming that several of us had the same concerns. In addition, there was an understanding that those involved in the program also wanted to remove systemic barriers for the new Black, Indigenous, people of color (BIPOC) leadership. We appreciated the solidarity statements pre-pandemic. This time around, there was an apparent commitment to make changes and to realize that removing barriers required the involvement of everyone participating in these conversations.

Another topic discoursed was related to professional organizations providing DEIA resources through several pipeline programs for underrepresented groups. Considering the new virtual environments and more access to DEIA resources, the question remained: as new emerging leaders, what is it that we needed from the Association of Research Libraries.

Most of the fellows agreed that we do not perceive a pipeline problem but rather a lack of commitment to BIPOC personnel and to empowerment of the same. Lack of commitment was discussed as the realization that although several organizations offer internship opportunities, training, and webinars, most of these opportunities are transient. There is no commitment to hire after the residency and/or internship programs are completed. In other words, there is a lack of commitment to hiring and to retaining BIPOC personnel.

It is my experience that BIPOC personnel are often over-mentored and under-sponsored. We asked for hiring opportunities and the possibility of ceding power, of allowing personnel to do the jobs we were hired to do.

Perhaps another topic I would have liked the ARL to consider is how to benchmark for assessment and accountability. For instance, I

would have like to learn more about what indicators are being used for measuring progress on DEIA efforts. It is my understanding that some institutions are using diversity dashboards to display current demographic composition, then following with disclosure statements about their benchmarks for improving DEIA in the next year.

Some of the leadership recommendations provided at the 2021 ARL Fall Meeting revealed the unequivocal awareness that it was going to take that, the leadership, to elevate DEIA efforts in all organizations if we wanted to realize change. Some examples given of leadership courses of action were fostering cultures of continual feedback, making the commitment to work intentionally, avoiding tokenizing the doers, assessing privilege and anti-racism training, and taking the lead in anti-racism efforts as a practice. There were many more recommendations contributed, but these are the ones resonating with me.

Effort and struggle have been key words used quite often during the fellowship experience. It is true that to improve our organizational cultures it does take everyone's engagement. Throughout my experience of the ARL LCDP, I witnessed various leaders attempting to make the best out of the disruptive environments and social climates faced. Strength and growth were demonstrated many times by all having the courage to disagree, to voice different opinions with colleagues who we were just beginning to know at the time. Those challenging conversations provided a window into the decision-making processes leadership goes through every day.

It was reassuring to know that despite the unpredictable climate, we were all vested in providing services to as many users as we could. There were, after all, access barriers to both physical and virtual environments. There was a strong emphasis on assessing DEIA efforts in our profession, along with reflections of scenarios and processes unperceived before. Indeed, "Transformation in This Time of Disruption" was the precise title for a session from which I believe we had hoped to emerge as better professionals.

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Endnotes

- 1 Association of Research Libraries, “Leadership and Career Development Program,” accessed December 13, 2019, <https://www.arl.org/category/our-priorities/diversity-equity-inclusion/leadership-and-career-development-program/>.
- 2 Association of Research Libraries, “Association Meeting, Fall 2021 (Invitation Only),” accessed September 30, 2021, <https://www.arl.org/event/association-meeting-fall-2021-invitation-only/>.