

Karina Soni. Walking on Eggshells: Experiences of Students of Color within Library and Information Science Master's Programs. A Master's Paper for the M.S. in I.S degree. May, 2020. 56 pages. Advisor: Dr. Amelia Gibson

The field of information and library science has long struggled with the lack of diversity in the workforce. In response, a number of programs have been created to encourage students of color to pursue careers within the library and information sciences. Despite this, the number of diverse individuals working in the field is still low. This paper explores instances of discrimination towards library and information science students of color and how these experiences shape their academic career and their outlook on the profession overall. Qualitative interviews were conducted with five students of color currently pursuing a master's degree in library and information science and will be transcribed and analyzed for overarching themes. This paper intends to identify ways students of color in LIS master's programs can be better supported.

Headings:

Minority Library Employees

Minorities in Library Science

Minority Librarians

Libraries & minorities

Cultural Literacy

WALKING ON EGGSHELLS: EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS OF COLOR WITHIN  
LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE MASTER'S PROGRAMS

by  
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A Master's paper submitted to the faculty  
of the School of Information and Library Science  
of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Science in  
Information Science.

Chapel Hill, North Carolina

May 2020

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## Introduction

*“Diversity is an essential component of any civil society. It is more than a moral imperative; it is a global necessity. Everyone can benefit from diversity, and diverse populations need to be supported so they can reach their full potential for themselves and their communities (American Library Association, 2012)”*

The field of information and library science has long struggled with the notion of diversity (Jones, 1974) and in response, have started a number of programs, initiatives and services to better reflect and serve the changing population. Diversity can be defined as “different characteristics and experiences that define individuals” (ALA, 2012) and can be measured through a number of dimensions, including but not limited to: race, ethnicity, age, gender, socioeconomic status, disability, sexual orientation and language. Historically, the library profession has tried to increase diversity within its workforce by creating initiatives based on the stronger inclusion of a more ethnically and racially diverse population. More recently, the needs of inclusivity in the profession based on different dimensions of diversity and intersectionality of different facets of being have been explored (Ettarh, 2014), however many claim that the profession has yet to make any strides in integration even though that has been the profession’s primary focus. Despite initiatives created to increase racial and ethnic diversity in librarianship, such as with the ALA’s Spectrum Scholar Program and the ACRL’s Mosaic Program, the number of ethnically diverse librarians have largely stayed the same over the course of the past several decades (Vinopal, 2016; ALA, 2012; ALISE, 2015).

Diversity within the library profession builds off different pieces and facets that contribute to the system as whole. With many recruitment strategies that focus solely on recruiting students of color and leadership development of librarians of color, many other important aspects that contribute to the “ecosystem” of diversity in Library and Information Science (LIS), such as the presence of faculty, librarian staff and post-doctorates of color, remain shortchanged and underdeveloped (Jaeger and Subramaniam, 2011).

This structure places an unnecessary and imbalanced burden on students of color pursuing higher degrees within the Library and Information Sciences. Students in this situation most likely have similar experiences to their counterparts of color in the workplace, where the burden of representing an entire swath of people is placed on their performance and their achievements (Alabi, 2015). Librarians of color, especially those who are the sole staff member of color, have an unnecessary expectation to “prove” their worth and feel like they must work harder to be considered of value (Vanscoy and Bright, 2019). The lack of racial and ethnic diversity that allow these situations to flourish in the workplace are also mirrored within the demographic makeup of Library and Information Science schools across the country. According to 2015 statistics from Association for Library and Information Science Education, the average number of white students in a given LIS program is 143, while the average total number of Latinx, Black, Asian, American Indian and Pacific Islander students combined is only 26 students (ALISE, 2015). Library and information science students most likely face discrimination two-fold: both within the academic setting overall and also within the field of library and information sciences.

Students of color in the LIS field hold a unique position of being both pulled to and pushed from the profession. While one facet of the profession may entice students of color to the field by actively recruiting them with scholarship money, training and experiential opportunities, another facet of microaggressions and discrimination actively pushes them away. This paper intends to investigate the perceptions and experiences of students of color currently within ALA-accredited Library and Information science programs across the United States and Canada and further investigate if instances of discrimination contribute to the overall library school experience.

In particular, there has been little research done along the perceptions and experiences of students of color currently pursuing an advanced LIS degree and overall, the scholarship around the unique experience of working librarians of color has been relegated to wide, nationwide surveys around experiences of microaggressions and discrimination within the workplace (Sierpe, 2019; Hathcock, 2015). These quantitative methodologies help to understand how common these sentiments are across the field, yet they only scratch the surface of the contextual or situational experiences that surround these numerous instances (Swanson, Tanaka, Gonzalez-Smith, 2018; Thorton, 2011) that can ultimately shape someone's perception and outlook of the library profession.

This project aims to qualitatively interview students of color currently pursuing library and information science degrees from ALA-accredited programs in the United States and Canada to gain a better understanding of unique and situational experience of

this population, as well as gain a deeper understanding of the situation microaggressions and discrimination these students may doubly face and how that impacts their perception of the field overall.

## Literature Review

### **Diversity in Library and Information Sciences**

The population of workers that make up the field of library and information sciences has been overwhelmingly homogenous for decades (ALA, 2012). Workforce diversity, in particularly racial and ethnic diversity, has been noted time and time again by the American Library Association as a “critical” issue in being able to serve the changing population of library patrons. According to the 2010 Diversity Counts Initiatives compiled by ALA office of research and statistics and office of diversity, white librarians make up a total of 88% of the overall population of librarians, a one percent decrease from the statistics compiled in 1990 (ALA, 2012). According to data from 2008, within library schools, racial and ethnic minorities constitute about 11% of the LIS student population, compared to 31.3% of the general ethnic makeup of the American population. This percentage is also significantly lower than the proportion of racial and ethnic minorities enrolled in other graduate degree programs (Jaeger & Jones, 2011; Kim & Sin, 2008).

Many programs have been created to directly combat the issue of a homogenous library staff population. Nationwide programs such as the ALA’s Spectrum Scholars, the



ARL's Mosaic program and Initiative to Recruit a Diverse Workforce, and many others sponsored by groups such as the Society of American Archivists and the Association of American Law Libraries, try to combat the problem of a diverse librarianship workforce with scholarship money and career training for individuals pursuing a library degree from underrepresented backgrounds (Hathcock, 2015). Alongside national endeavors, grants from groups like the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) fund library programs at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and programs like the Academic and Cultural Enrichment (ACE) Scholars Program at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, which work to promote diversity and add value to the library and information studies profession (Croxtan, Crumpton and Holmes, 2016). Despite the existence of these programs, some of which have been around for over 20 years, the make-up of individuals working in the field of librarianship has largely stayed the same. Many scholars believe recruitment initiatives that aim to further diversity recruitment in LIS act as a band-aid for larger, more systemic issues around the lack of diversity in other components of the profession (Vinopal, 2016).

Recruitment to the field does not necessarily mean retention: "effective diversity work is about meaningful inclusion — not only the attainment of racial heterogeneity in a given LIS space, but also its maintenance through active attention to the conditions within that space" (Hudson, 2017, p.10). Franklin and Jaeger suggest that "interventions to improve diversity in LIS should happen in multiple aspects of the field if there is any chance of success... All aspects of diversity in the field depend on one another. Trying to

recruit more diverse master's students may seem like an easy solution to diversity, but it will not be sufficient to succeed” (Jaeger & Subramainian, 2011, p. 174; Franklin & Jaeger, 2009).

### **Inherent Whiteness in LIS**

Addressing the lack of diversity in the field of information and library science has boiled down to a numbers game: many diversity initiatives work to increase the number and representation of racially and ethnically diverse people, but do little to combat the distinct culture of librarianship where whiteness is the norm (Hathcock, 2015; Galvan, 2015; Honma, 2005). Galvan defines whiteness as “white [skin color], heterosexual, capitalist, and middle class” and white ideology as “based on beliefs, values behaviors, habits and attitudes, which result in the unequal distribution of power and privilege (Galvan, 2015).” Historically, whiteness has always been present in the foundational history of American libraries. From libraries being used as cultural institution in the early 1900s to impart American values on white immigrants to having separate library facilities for patrons of color before the civil rights era (Honma, 2005; Lipsitz, 1998), libraries are built upon a system that was not created to support the information needs and desires of individuals of color and continue to sustain this foundation today (Hathcock, 2015).

The structure of whiteness in present day libraries is less obvious than in eras past, though they are just as capable in creating an unwelcoming setting for individuals who fall out of the white “norm” of modern-day librarianship. The opinion of libraries,

by both librarians and by others outside of the field, is generally positive and is couched within an ideal of egalitarianism, democracy and forward-thinking political views. This purported and “carefully-crafted” image of librarianship “as a fundamentally noble enterprise” is bolstered by the multicultural and diverse trends in the library setting, however these notions do little to actually evaluate the historic “white liberalism” that dominates the field (Sierpe, 2019, Hathcock, 2015, 2017, 2019). In this context, white liberalism can look like recruiting librarians of color in the workplace, but creating hostile work environments through microaggressions and paternalism (Sierpe, 2019; Hathcock, 2015) that can ultimately lead people to exit the workplace and potentially the profession (Page, 2018; Juárez, 2015).

Many of those currently within the library and information science system do not consciously know their role in upholding this system. Whiteness is “insidious” and “invisible” and works to create a categorization of who is within the system and who is outside, different and therefore other (Hathcock, 2015). Additionally, those who fall under the norm of the system continue to father the whiteness of the field, even if their actions are not rooted in overt discrimination. As Gohr (2017) states, “The stereotype of the white bun lady librarian is accepted, sometimes celebrated, but never critically analyzed in terms of reproduction of racial hierarchies within LIS. While there may be a great number of individual librarians that are actively against racism, white librarians still benefit from a system which ensures unequal distribution of resources and opportunities between racial groups (p.44).”

White librarians and librarians of color do the same job and the same work, but their experiences within the field are extremely different. Librarians of color routinely have to deal with a number of issues that their white colleagues never have to deal with, let alone notice while in the workplace (St. Lifer and Nelson, 1997). Workplace issues include: being ignored, patronized, invalidated and/or dismissed by other library staff, leadership or users (Walker, 2015); having their authority challenged; feelings of isolation and alienation; the need to excel or “be twice as good”; being offered fewer or different opportunities than their white counterparts; being loaded with additional amounts of work to lead diversity groups or serve on committees; and burnout (Vanscoy & Bright, 2019; Juarez, 2015; Linares and Cunningham, 2018; Alabi, 2018; 2015). In addition to workplace issues, librarians of color also have to deal with complex issues around social status, family opinion and financial instability that their white counterparts often do not have to manage (Swanson, Tanaka, Gonzalez-Smith, 2018).

As it currently stands, there has been little research conducted around the experiences of students of color currently studying library and information science. Even though there are many initiatives and programs intended to support students of color, these students most likely face a number of unique challenges that can make their time within library school difficult. Research shows that students of color already face a disproportionate amount of ethnic and racial discrimination from their peers, university staff and faculty that put students of color at a disadvantage for academic success (Suarez-Balcazar, 2003).

## Methodology

From February 2020 to March 2020, five phenomenological qualitative interviews were conducted with students of color who attend ALA-accredited masters programs in the U.S. or Canada to understand their definition of discrimination, their perceptions, and experiences within their master's program and how these experiences shaped their time in school and their opinion of the LIS field overall. Students of color were defined as individuals who self-identify, at least in part, as any race or ethnicity other than white/Caucasian. Students had all completed at least one semester of their program. None of the students self-identified as an international student.

Participants were recruited via snowball and purposive sampling primarily through the researchers' professional network of library students of color. Informational emails were sent to the School of Information and Library Science (SILS) at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, as well as the American Library Associations (ALA) Spectrum Scholarship network. The researcher also posted about the project on her professional Twitter account (Appendix 1).

Those who expressed interest in the study were then asked to answer screener questions to confirm eligibility criteria via email or through an online screener using Qualtrics. Eligible participants were then sent a scripted email containing more

information about the nature of the study and were asked if they were still interested in participating. If participants confirmed, interviews were scheduled based on the participant's preferred interview time. Participants had the option to be interviewed online or face-to-face. Virtual interviews were conducted using Zoom, a cloud-based video conferencing platform that can be accessed via a participant's phone, tablet, or computer. For face-to-face interviews, private locations where participants could speak freely were used. Before each interview, participants completed a short survey asking for basic demographic information. An interview guide was created with a set of about five overarching questions. The interviews lasted from 30 minutes to one hour, and were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed for data analysis. Transcription was completed by the researcher using Wreally.Transcribe, an online transcription software.

## Interview Questions

The pre-interview questions consisted primarily of demographic information such as student's race and ethnicity, their degree type and if their master's program was delivered in-person or online. The qualitative interview questions (Appendix II) centered around answering three main research questions: how library and information science students define discrimination, what these instances of discriminatory experiences were and how they affected their outlook on both their time in school and the LIS field as a whole. Sub questions were created under each of these general research topics in order to illicit rich responses from participants.

## Data Analysis Methods

The interviews were recorded using a digital recording device or were recorded directly through Zoom if a participant elected to be interviewed digitally. Transcription was completed using Wreally.Transcribe, an online transcription software. Participants were assigned participant ID numbers and identifying information around specific professors, course names and specific LIS programs were redacted from the transcriptions. Dedoose, an online qualitative coding program, was used to code the data. The researcher used an open and iterative process to develop a codebook and understand the major concepts and themes that appeared throughout the interview process.

## Limitations

The research timeframe for this project was limited to just five months, which created significant limitations in the number of participants able to be interviewed and the amount of time spent on analysis. The sampling technique and the size of the sample pool were also a large limitation to the quality of this study. Only five people were interviewed, and the majority of those individuals came from one institutional program, therefore this study cannot truly ascertain the effects of discrimination to all students of color within LIS programs. Alongside of this limitation, the majority of this study was completed between February 2020 to May 2020 during the COVID-19 public health crises. In March of 2020, human subjects research conducted at UNC-Chapel Hill was suspended by the institution's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and university campuses across the United States and Canada, including UNC-Chapel Hill, shuttered doors and moved to remote instruction for the remainder of the semester. Even though recruitment

was extremely successful, only five interviews could be completed for the study. Even when participants could have been interviewed, the main researcher in the study did not have the mental capacity or energy to complete more interviews or conduct additional analysis due to the mental health stressors and lifestyle changes brought on by COVID-19.



## Results

The results of this study revealed the thoughts, feelings, and experiences around participants identity; their experiences with discrimination within their master's program; and how the blend of these two aspects of their lives shaped their opinion of the field overall.

### *Participants' Background*

Demographic information about race, degree type and institution were collected prior to the qualitative interviews. Due to the small sample size of the project, the small number of students of color at each institution and the oversampling from one specific institution, the names of the institutions will not be revealed to protect participants' identity.

Participants were asked about their race and ethnicity. Participants gave a variety of answers, including: "Black", "South Asian", "Latinx", "Multiracial, Black-identifying" and "Asian/Filipino-American." For their intended degree, one participant was pursuing a Masters in Library Science (MLS), three students were pursuing a Masters in Information Science (MSIS), and one student was pursuing a Masters in Library and Information Science (MLIS). All students interviewed for this project took courses through in-person instruction. Although not formally asked within the pre-

interview or during the qualitative interview, two participants shared that their LIS degree would be their second master's degree.

### *Racial Identity*

All participants overwhelmingly agreed that their racial and ethnic identity was important to their sense of self. However, their perception of their own race was complicated due to their own experiences. The awareness of their race was heightened due to the overwhelming number of white peers and faculty they interacted with within their LIS program.

Many participants talked about how their race and ethnicity was the first thing people notice about who they are:

“I just think [my racial identity is] important, definitely an important part of how I see myself and how I interact with the world and I think how the world ultimately interacts with me.” – Participant 002

“It's very important. It's shaped like a huge part of how I've navigated through life and the choices I've made and the beliefs and the values that I hold, so it's something that's like pretty integral to my identity.” – Participant 004

A number of participants talked about how fully accepting their racial identities as an integral part of themselves was complicated based on things such as: historical oppression, stereotypes around race and ethnicity, ideas about how certain racial and ethnic identities “should” look, and the amount of exposure they have had to other people of color.

“...[My racial and ethnic identity] feels a little loaded for me. I think it's very important because it's the first thing somebody sees, maybe outside of my hair. But my own connections to my own ethnicity and race sometimes feels pretty disjointed, one because I left the Philippines. But also, I grew up with

predominantly white people even in [place of residence]. So my exposure to other Asians outside of my family were minimal.” – Participant 001

“I mean [being Latinx is a] pretty big identity, I identify with that side of the family a lot more. The Colombian side is a really big part of my childhood in like just like my memory structure is of like growing up. So it is a big it's a big part of it. I think I enjoy that it differentiates me because I grew up in...and so like that [area] is also super white. I don't know. It's weird. It's weird, but I'm also mixed so I have like a weird like, back and forth...I have a huge like complex about it sometimes. Not sometimes, I have a huge complex about like my identity where I don't think, I definitely don't see myself as like hyper Latinx, but I also don't see myself as like super white either. I'm surrounded by white people my whole life basically except for like my family for the most part. So it's a big part of my identity, but it's... something that I still struggle with as like somebody's mixed and definitely has to deal with both of those worlds.” – Participant 003

“So identify as black. So I mean... maybe you don't know, with a lot of black people. It's like interesting when it comes to talking about heritage, because I feel like I could portion of it is unknown, part of that is like a result of slavery, with mixed ancestry. So there's like... so you know that your black, and with rules like the Three-Fifths rule that works with how your classified. But there are other parts of you that are part of your racial makeup that are often ignored, and so that can be interesting when in like coming in to terms with your identity. So to talk about that from my own experience, I identify as black. I know for a fact that my dad's family like is at least somewhat mixed like I know of some like British ancestry like way down the line, but that's not something that is really ever get brought that's ever brought up. You're just kind of labeled as black and it's kind of like you check that box. So it was interesting, even filling out the survey form because I'm like, ‘All right. So what is your racial identity? It's like, well black, but it's also probably a few other things, but I'm just going to leave it at black because that's the most simple right?’” – Participant 005

Participants’ racial and ethnic identities were an important piece of their identities, but they were especially aware of their backgrounds within their Master’s programs due to its lack of diversity.

“I just think [my LIS program] and libraries as a field in general is, like...I knew it was white, but then I didn't. I was surprised how white it is.” – Participant 003

“I think [my LIS program is] definitely more white leaning because, I know like the different faculties here. They're very diverse, like our school is super duper diverse. Like, I would say like it's majority, like it's made up of visible minorities. But like our program is like almost like exclusively White.” – Participant 004

“It's such a weird paradox because... I'm in a state that has a significant amount of black people in general. Yet when I get to like my small grad program, it's like not representative, right? So there's like a huge disconnect between like, ‘oh like this is how it is around the state... I've gone, you know to a State [school] but it is just odd to think about like, okay. So here I am and I step off campus and like I see so many black people and then it's like when I'm at school, it's like not the case.” – Participant 005

Participant 005 also remarked that the lack of racial diversity was something that was also present in the make-up of the faculty and administration of their program.

“I don't know of that many black or other racial identifying professors here at [my university] and I think about my time here. I find [my university] to be I mean, I'm not from here, I find it to be very liberal place, which is a good in refreshing thing, in terms of like attitudes towards race and diversity. However, it's interesting because at least in like my department for my graduate program like the racial makeup doesn't necessarily represent that?” – Participant 005

### *Isolation*

The lack of racial diversity within these students' LIS programs led to feelings of isolation within all participants. Students' had feelings of fear and anxiety around being one of the few, and sometimes the only, student of color within a classroom. Some participants felt that they would be easy targets by other classmates for critiques, judgements, and other negative remarks.

“Going into orientation as like, I genuinely felt scared because [there were] so many white people. Like, I think I was like, literally squinting into the crowd trying to see where like my fellow ethnics are. I was looking, I was looking and at the end I was like, ‘all right, I guess I'll just have to see how this goes...’ I couldn't find anyone. So it just made me kind of shrivel up a little bit.” – Participant 004

“Like, I always just do like a quick head count. I'm like, ‘there's three of us’ or like, ‘well, it's just me.’ I can't turn that off. Like, I don't know how. Every time it's like the pre-flight or fight trigger, you know, because I've been in rooms like [that] in undergrad... I've been in many classrooms where I was like one, or like less, you know less than five people of color [in the classroom]. So I'm like, I'm always just aware...if there's only me, it's easy for it to everybody else to turn

against me because there's only one of me, like strength in numbers. There's no numbers. It's me.... I'm still Brown and I'm still outnumbered in every room.” – Participant 001

Participants felt even further isolated when their white classmates lacked empathy or critical awareness of the experiences and struggles related to being a person of color. For example, Participant 003, who stated in the beginning of their interview that they struggle with their mixed Latinx identity, had an experience during a class discussion where a white classmate said that they did not “look brown” as she lamented about the issues of diversity within libraries.

“During that discussion like basically this woman...was talking about like ‘we're all white look at us, we're all white like what can we do’ and I was like, ‘We're not all white. I'm not white’ and then she's like, ‘I'm saying people who look Brown.’... There were like Asian American students in that class. You can't just say we're all white. Like I was just like, you can't say that, and I don't identify as a white person, and she then she said what she said, I was like, oh....I learned that day, when that white woman told me I wasn't brown enough, to not speak up. ” – Participant 003

Many participants also echoed that they received little support in their isolation from faculty. In the situation presented by Participant 003, the professor of the class the discussion took place in did not interject or talk about the situation after it happened.

“The teacher was kind of old so I assume she didn't hear... We talked [in a different] class how the teacher should have...just jumped in and just like done something productive.” – Participant 003

Participants also felt that curriculum-based study about race and diversity in their graduate program was limited. For example, Participant 005 could not recall a class that discussed race throughout their entire graduate program:

“I cannot recall a reading in our coursework that we talked about race. And I.. maybe I just can't remember it at the time, but I cannot think of one like in particular talks about like race and information.” – Participant 005

Participant 002 remarked that their LIS school had a program around diversity, but felt that it did not do enough in terms of education for the students and was ultimately just a way for their program to “look good.”

“I think like within the master's program, it feels like something that is said for the purposes of making the program look good when it isn't necessarily like implemented in a way that actually, like to me, that like I feel I've benefited from. It like [doesn't] necessarily address things that I've experienced or friends of mine have experienced...I think the whole notion of like learning like credentials in diversity just like in and of itself is a strange concept. and I think that like it's something that like the program does so that people can say like ‘Oh, I'm diverse.’ I don't know... you're qualified to talk about diversity perspective? I don't know. I think it's kind of it also like gives students who don't necessarily experience certain things that go along with like being a student of color in this program or being of like a gender or sexual minority in this program, it gives them the sort of like feeling that they can speak on certain things that I don't know if they're necessarily like a equipped to speak on as well” – Participant 002

### *Additional Burden on Students of Color*

Participants felt that the onus of responsibility around bringing up racialized issues squarely fell on their shoulders. In class, participants routinely talked about how they felt that they needed to speak up to educate their peers around diversity issues, especially when professors, who also lacked the expertise to discuss race within LIS, would bring up sensitive subjects. Participant 004 spoke about an experience with a white professor who tried to bring up racially sensitive issues and how their friend, another student of color, responded:

“This one particular professor, like I get that like this is part of like the curriculum is to ask uncomfortable questions. He teaches information ethics for context, but I feel like, I don't know, I feel like those questions would be better framed and better asked by a faculty of color. The professor asked the question of that “are stereotypes inherently bad,” which I don't know. I feel like for a white professor to be asking this is like a bit dicey. I was like, ‘You kind of don't exactly have the authority to determine or even ask that question especially to a group of like literally white people.’ Yeah, because the answer from white people [were] like, ‘Well, they're not that bad-bad, like they helped in like this, this, and this.’ It's like

trying to justify it before my friend had to like really put her foot down and speak up." – Participant 004

Students would routinely have to speak up at the expense of their own feelings and place themselves in uncomfortable situations with classmates and other peers.

Participant 004 continued this story and talked about how their friend felt uncomfortable after routinely being expected by the professor to be the person to speak up in class during conversations that centered around diversity and race:

"She felt like mega uncomfortable. Like [this white professor] knows that my friend is known for like speaking up and being loud. So even as she was asking the question, she was like kind of giving my friend like a look that like 'I expect that you're going to like say something back to this.' And she did. She said something along the lines of 'Okay, stereotypes might not be like harmful to you. But you're generalizing groups of people and you're erasing personal stories and histories.' And yeah, so like that friend has like quite a few stories of where she has just very vocally called out like instances like that. – Participant 004

Participant 004's friend also felt uncomfortable having to respond to classmates who would routinely say problematic things within class discussions:

"In a core class, a white student suggested to in order to weed collections and like determine what we should get rid of in order to make room for new materials, she suggested we get rid of like colonized history, which my friend was taken aback by, because we are on stolen land. We are learning literally about indigenous knowledge and her idea was to get rid of it completely. So my friend spoke up very vocally and said that it makes her uncomfortable to be in the same program as someone who thinks like that." – Participant 004

These types of negative interactions with classmates furthered some students' feelings of isolation. For example, Participant 002 tried to talk to some of their classmates about how some of their actions in a student organization could be seen as hurtful. Participant 002's classmates were taken aback and had a very emotional response.

"If you can't have a conversation with somebody who's like telling you that this is a problem without you feeling like personally attacked, then like you clearly aren't

ready to like, shoulder some of like the emotional burden that comes with like speaking or like empowering people of color.” – Participant 002

The experience Participant 002 had with their classmates made them frustrated and wary about being able to find people within their LIS program that understood diversity issues within the LIS field.

“[The situation] was frustrating because there were a number of emotions that were involved in that interaction, not necessarily like from me, but from the people that we were speaking to. And to me it just sort of was indicative of the fact that like, people like while they might talk about like race and racial justice and like the hypothetical or even in like classes or courses. It's like, you are not ready for somebody to tell you that that's not okay and that it's not about you, and like to actually like live that experience and like for that to be like within the first year of my program, [the experience was] really kind of like frustrating that these are my peers and these are the people that I have to have class with. It's like if I can't even have a conversation with you about this, and it's like we can't even like begin to bring up like why certain things are an issue within LIS, so it's kind of like for me sort of set a standard.” -Participant 002

Because participants were routinely the only students of color within their classrooms, they felt that when they did speak up, their opinions and ideas were tokenized and interpreted to represent the thoughts of feelings of entire swaths of people.

“You know in most of my classes, I've been the only black guy, so it's like if I go and talk about like this perspective, like I don't want it to be treated like such a novelty that like everyone's like, ‘Oh, let's let the black guy give his perspective [for] the entire, you know black community,’ but at the same time it's like also too...you feel like you should speak up, but your hesitant to because you don't want to be that define, defining characteristic, you know?” – Participant 005

To combat these feelings of isolation, two participants within the study talked about working with or creating their own student groups in order to find more people to find other students of color or likeminded individuals to connect with.

“Even like being in the program I'm in and working with an organization for like that was intended or that is intended to support students of color.” – Participant 002



However, Participant 001 lamented at the thought of working so hard to get their student group up and running, but being discontinued after their graduation:

“I don't want these things to die on the vine type of thing, because we're only here for two years and so many things change, so many things get started and stopped but I think real inherent care for the different marginalized groups in the school should not be like, ‘oh well, yeah a few years ago blah blah was here and you know, they really did this thing, but then they left and it's done.” I'm like no that's...the most frustrating part. I'm just like I don't want the initiative of trying to provide spaces for people of color for, you know certain groups to leave when the person who was so passionate about it also leaves.” – Participant 001

*Students accustomed to isolation, tokenization, and extra work associated with being a person of color*

Almost all of the participants talked about how these instances of isolation, tokenization and extra work were par for the course for students of color. Although the students were unsurprised by these instances, they were still exasperated by the fact that they were happening to themselves and their classmates of color.

“[These experiences have] been like one of like the cons of [my LIS program]. Like this master's program is good at like a lot of things and it's like rewarding, but like that does come to a very personal cost if you are a minority. Like that is straight up what it is. You have to be able to look past and give up, and be quiet and in order to succeed here” – Participant 004

“I'm like, it's 2020. Please. Like this is so old, just like get it over with, like just stop being a jerk. That's how I feel. It's like at this point, I'm just tired. Like I feel like garbage about it. I think that it's very stupid. But I also am just so tired...[I've] gotta still deal with this and I'm like there's other things to worry, about, like when's Beyonce's next album going to come out.” – Participant 001

Some participants have created their own coping methods to deal with these problems. For example, Participant 003 was upset about the situation where a classmate

said they did not “look brown,” but they had learned to deal with issues like this by “zoning shit out.”

“I’m pretty good at zoning shit out and just like, like I felt like the event that happened, because it was directed at me, like really hit me. But like when people say crazy shit just I just like roll my eyes and or just like internally scream and then just like keep going cuz I just want to pass this class.” – Participant 003

Additionally, they also felt that pushes to create more meaningful racial diversity within LIS classrooms and curriculums were being met with little action that kicked the problem of racial diversity further down the road for the next group of students and faculty to deal with.

“So I think there just has to be more, I guess conversation...Sometimes it's just so much talking, nothing gets done.” – Participant 001

“I want there to be like actual change happening. Like that's what I wanted to see like concrete changes, like changes to the curriculum, changes to the faculty, changes to the cohort that we let in. But like during my time [in my program] like my school does three rounds of [student] intake. During those intake cycles, I don't think I've seen like a like a massive change, massive shift in the demographics. So, like that's what I wanted to see, some like actual like actual change instead of just talking...I've actually brought up this issue with one of the ethnic colleagues because he's on like a committee for basically restructuring the program and I told them like you have to mention this at the next meeting, and I gave him like I think a full page of notes, and he brought that up and they were saying that basically my program like wants to make change, but they're just unsure of how to do it. Like they're consulting like indigenous elders in the community to hire more indigenous faculty come Fall 2020. But again, it's like I'm hearing the language. It's a lot of like, ‘We're still consulting, we're in the process.’ I think for me, it's just like not moving quick enough” – Participant 004

“...Like how [my school’s administration] asks for student feedback and it feels like it's being ignored. Not so much that like, anybody expects things to happen overnight, but just feeling like those things that like people have spoken about and have spoken about repeatedly, like addressing the fact that like, ‘Hey, we hear that you feel like this is an issue, we can't do something during your here, this is what we're doing so that it happens in the future.’ Like I feel like that speaks to what the school values and what it doesn't it. Also, what it chooses to tell students about the direction of the program and versus what it doesn't I think speaks a lot to what they value.” – Participant 002

### *Discrimination*

Most students did not see the aforementioned actions of isolation, tokenization, and inaction around racial diversity issues in LIS as discriminatory. Students' definitions of discrimination varied widely, from being excluded from experiences due to their racial or ethnic makeup, to negative opinions and actions associated to racial or ethnic groups, to the idea of invalidation of another's experience.

“[Discrimination is] not giving credence to like, another worldview and just like a different experience, and I'm not saying like everyone's... like everyone's experience is their experience, in like so like I think discrimination is just like... invalidating someone's experience” – Participant 003

“So I would say the discrimination is when you treat someone differently, often more negatively, based on a certain belief or perception that you have.” – Participant 005

“Well for me, discrimination is just like this level of like, unfairness. That's like grounded on nothing. Like, there's no real validity to judgment that somebody has on you or against you. Yeah, [it's] like for people to discriminate is just like to hold, you know, certain assumptions over the reality of who or what that person is. Like, they're emphasizing or like they're putting priority to like their own preconceived notions about that person and the categories that they're part of as opposed to knowing who that person is, and it could be anything.” – Participant 001

Students felt that because they were not being actively being excluded or prejudiced against because of they looked, it did not rise to the level of “discrimination,” but that instead the actions could instead be described as “problematic” or “passive.”

“I think with like discriminatory behavior, like I think like the difference would be is that like the person like loses out on something or they like don't gain something that they otherwise would have. With like problematic behavior...It's like not I'm not necessarily like losing anything, but it's definitely like the way the person is thinking or the actions are sort of like detrimental to me emotionally, but not necessarily in my personal experience like physically. But I think like perhaps when I think of discriminatory, I think of like being passed up for something or

not getting something that you ultimately deserve, or not getting like resources that you need to. I think that's sort of the way I would define that differently" – Participant 002

Only one participant, Participant 004, felt that discrimination encompassed more than just overt actions of exclusion.

"Basically, anything over or even covert actions, or I would say even like thoughts would go into it. Words, action, thoughts, microaggressions go into it, anything like that. I would count as discrimination." – Participant 004

Participants stated that the silence around racial and ethnic issues within their LIS degree program conferred negative thoughts and microaggressions towards students of color.

"...Every day you walk in class and you're the only person of color, or you know for, like people who there may be more people of their particular race, they still feel the need to like, be representative, so that can be taxing, right? So, it's every day. There may not be such a direct, specific instance, that like, 'Oh, because I'm the certain race this is how it impacted it daily,' but it's more about those silent moments, I think." – Participant 005

"Has [my program] personally given me that impression that like, I'm encroaching? No. But have has it been as welcoming? I don't want to say yes." – Participant 001

"I think the silence probably speaks, right? Like, everything that you're saying there's something that you're not saying. Granted, because of that like if we're not talking about race, I know they're not probably intentionally trying to imply that you know, there's a void there. But at the same time it's like I don't know, but I think there could be a lot more opportunities for inclusion." – Participant 005

Participants also spoke about how discussions about race and ethnicity within LIS programs primarily happened amongst majority-white students, which created problematic, self-congratulatory narratives and echo-chamber conversations around race.

"We don't have like a lot of black people in the program, most of the conversations about race or diversity or like social justice in LIS has happened in rooms where it's predominantly white women. And so I think like if I was white,

they'd be like comfortable saying like, "Oh, how life-changing this particular diversity classes" and they wouldn't have somebody like challenging them on like 'Okay, why is this life-changing for you?' Or they wouldn't have somebody saying like 'Okay, that's great. That does not make you an expert in XYZ...It's more comfortable in that regard.'" – Participant 002

But generally, most participants agreed that most of their white colleagues were generally uncomfortable speaking about race, especially when the topic was raised by students of color. Participant 004 talks about an experience having to present on race, one time as an individual and then within a group project with white classmates:

"Like, I've done team presentations and I've done individual presentations, and I've noticed like during when I do individual presentation when it's just myself, and I speak on the topic of race. I can almost hear like a hush in the room versus when I bring up the topic of race with my other colleagues who again like are white, and then everyone seems to be more okay with it. Like for example in my core class, I mentioned like that there isn't enough like diverse materials, and if there is there like kind of you have to search for them, and the class was very receptive to this because my colleagues that I was presenting with, they were white. But versus last semester when I did a presentation by myself on medical consent and how it has targeted black people and indigenous people specifically, I could feel like the classroom get uncomfortable because like it was quiet enough to hear a pin drop" – Participant 004

Participant 002 felt that their presence made classmates generally uncomfortable. This caused them to question their personality and wonder how they "present" to others.

"I think that like, I personally have never considered myself an intimidating person. Like, I don't think that that's like necessarily part of my personality. But I think just in how like certain people interact with me in this program they like, for certain people, it feels like they're walking on eggshells around me. I don't know if that's necessarily just like how I like my personality presents itself in this program, but it's like to me like there are a number of people who like won't look me in the eye when they talk to me or they're like very... like I've been described as like hard to read when I feel like my emotions show on my face constantly. So it's just kind of, I don't know, like microaggressive behaviors of sort. Just like how people choose to interact with me have like made me wonder, 'like am more intimidating than I think I am?'" – Participant 002

*Problematic behavior in school means problematic behavior in the field*

Participants were fearful that the lack of diversity within the LIS career field would create the same instances of problematic behavior they experienced within their graduate program.

“[Having to confront people in the workplace around issues of racial diversity is] scary as fuck... like, like I don't know if I have the balls to do that. Like I mean, like that's scary. Like ... like especially, especially for all of us who were like early career. Like that's, that's the other part of like the power complex of like working these spaces. I can't be like my first year [of a job] and call out like a Vice Provost or like a dean.” – Participant 003

“I think [my LIS graduate program] has definitely led me to be aware of like how homogenized it is, how it skews towards like one direction, and it kind of like makes me like question [the profession]. It's definitely like kind of put me like in like a crisis of sorts where I'm generally wondering that... will I be like one of those statistics where like, because as a minority, I will not have the same opportunities in the field as white counterpart might? Like say in the academic institution, would I be looked over for tenure in favor of someone else? Would I be looked over for a raise in favor of like someone else? Like just questions like that really just is what bothers me and how that has affected the way I see the field as a whole.” – Participant 004

Participants mentioned that they fear that institutions could potentially hire them as their “token diversity” employee, but not actually support their growth, their career, and their identity as a professional of color.

“Literally every single institution that I'm currently applying for, they have like a statement that we are all a committed to like equal blah blah blah, like whatever that nonsense is, cool. But like at the end of the day, am I just like your token hire? Or do you actually care about like my progression and well-being, because there's a difference between like just hiring me to fill a spot, but versus like hiring me to fill a spot and then like wanting to see growth for myself and like supporting that rather than just expecting me to just like do the job perfectly.” – Participant 004

They also know that continued instances of problematic behavior can potentially cause students of color to burn out and leave the LIS career entirely.

“It does make me feel like there's an expiration date, maybe to the levels of commitment that people might have because at some point it just might be too

much to handle. To kind of deal with whiteness, you know, and you can't fault them for that, because they're kind of, you know, pushing a big boulder up a hill. but I think if the boulder moves even a little bit that's pretty good.” – Participant 001

“But it's like, am I going to go in to the field and then be the only black guy on a UX team? And also too: especially for people who are interested in like user experience, information analytics, too, like racial makeup is like, integral to the success of these things, right? Like if I have... if I'm trying to design a product or something and I don't have a like diverse participant pool for like a test or something, right? Like I'm in no way thinking about or identifying like how racial needs may be different. And there's no way, there's no way that you can argue that [race has] no impact on it. Like everyone brings their own perspective, right? So, I think the way that its impacted my education is looking out, not looking here, because this is only a finite amount of time. But when you go out into the world that's going to be what matters.” – Participant 005

“[The experience in the LIS program] kind of like made me wonder like how I'm going to exist when I'm outside of this program. Like I know this is going to be the case, where I feel like I'm having to teach people, and I know it's going to be the case that people are going to say certain things and I'm going to be the only one in the room and I'm going to have to like, defend myself and like unfortunately have to defend a lot more people than I should be expected to defend or that... I should even need to be defending. In the sense that I'll be called like speak for black people when I shouldn't be being called to speak for an entire population that is very diverse and has its own nuances based on who you are where you're from. But I think that like that will be an issue... I'm not always going to have like somebody there to support [me]. And I think like also it's impacted how like I've approached the job search as well, because I look at companies and it's like I don't want to be the only black person there. I don't want to be one of two black people and like that's important to have like that sense of camaraderie. And like I'm glad that I found it in my program, but I am also like concerned of what's up what that's going to be like when I leave and I'm in profession.” – Participant 002

Participants also worried that their white classmates who lack cultural competence would not be able to serve diverse patrons within their career and would further alienate patrons of color from libraries.

“You're going to have diverse clients. So if you're this uncomfortable just speaking about [race], how will you actually like recognize this void when you have to treat a client and meet them where they are?” – Participant 004

“So I'm like, ‘Fuck you're going to, like you're probably gonna hurt someone where you go.’ That's kind of like my reactions. Like when you have that kind of mentality is like you're going to hurt someone else when you get a job.” – Participant 003

### *Hope*

However, despite the fact that participants know that it is an uphill battle to try to change diversity issues within the LIS field, the participants still believe that the work of racial diversity in LIS is important and must be done.

“Um, well, I think that there's a shit ton more work to do, and I think that despite the mental and emotional labor and probably gymnastics that people of color have to do, I think it's important work to just still be present. Like, I think me being in this program is representation.” – Participant 001

“[The diversity issues in LIS make me] a little discouraged, but it also gives me the mindset to look for opportunities where diversity is actually part of the institution, rather than like a token extra side project to them. I feel like if I can at least do that, like look for career growth and opportunities [at institutions] that have diversity at the forefront of their mind, rather than an afterthought, I feel like at least I'm getting somewhere in that sense.” – Participant 004

Participants felt that the problematic behaviors they experienced in their LIS program was ultimately helpful and that it provided a way for them to learn how to handle situations like that when they will eventually come up in the workplace.

“It doesn't like curb my want to join the field, but it just makes me want to have a like a better vocabulary and be kind of vigilant in the field, and like hopefully be brave enough to say shit when I see something.” – Participant 003

Participant 002 also hoped that the knowledge they take away from that experience will help other people of color within the LIS field.

“I think like one positive thing as somebody of color, like I feel like because I am who I am, like I can speak on certain things in a classroom setting that like wouldn't otherwise be talked about, and I've also learned about how to make certain things work for my community and my communities that I come from. So, it's like I think from being in those spaces and just seeing like how much like the



field still has to go. I think it is like even outside of that, it's been comforting to me knowing that like I now have tools to like make it better for other people and to encourage better from the field.” – Participant 002

Participants also know the field is changing, albeit slowly, but they feel inspired and nurtured by faculty and classmates of color currently in the field.

“I think finding my advisor, who is a professor of color, in my first semester, just finding someone that I was like, ‘I’m on her level.’ Like just finding someone that you can feel like ‘Oh the like I could talk about things that have happened.’ She will expose me to like interesting things in and engage me and make information science way interesting” – Participant 003

“Like with my like professors and my friends and my peers and things, it's been helpful to know that like I'm not going through certain things alone and that they get that certain things are happening the way that they do, and then just like being supportive, so it's nice to have like that group.” – Participant 002

“I would say some of the fears have been like alleviated a little bit because one of my profs was someone of same similar background to me... he understood where I came from.” – Participant 004

“I think that there are certain people in the program that I think are great...What's the word... Arbiters of change? Like I think that there is a lot of people who want to diversify the pool, who want to create, you know, inherently diverse, inherently good work, and teach that material.” – Participant 001

The participants in this study also hope that their presence within the LIS field will inspire other people of color to have a different opinion of LIS or consider joining the LIS field themselves.

“There have been like moments of bravery like that, that like even if I have not participated in it or witness it, I do take pride in it. Because when there is a win for us all.” – Participant 004

“[Diversity in LIS] is like planning a garden that you won't see... Hopefully I can see it in my lifetime that there's some like real enacted change. But if it just means that like another Asian person, a young Asian, person a young black person sees me sitting right at the reference desk, and is like "Oh yeah, I can do that." I'm pretty good with that, honestly.” – Participant 001

The participants also offered some ideas towards solutions, such as having more support for staff and training, better recruitment of students and faculty of color, and grounding teaching and pedagogy in real-world examples and applications.

“Like it means that you're not leaning on student organizations to do the work that you should hire somebody full-time to do. Yeah, and I think that happens with like even outside of like the schools like diversity, or they're like other work like you know, we have like people in student services who are amazing and like they do the best they can, but they're also like spread really thin, and it's not like I wouldn't necessarily expect them to like shoulder that additional [work]. Like, let's figure this out for the specific group of students in like, I recognize that their hands are tied and I do think they're doing a great job for the amount of work that they do, but I think like it's also important to like hire staff members and to hire that support where people need it and like show that you're investing in your students outside of this very superficial certificate so that people can check boxes and say that like, ‘I'm diverse.’” – Participant 002

“We perhaps need to have like an international coordinator, we need to have more support for people for whom English isn't their first language, or like we need more resources for students who are like two black people in all of their classes all the time. I think, in looking at things different, or looking at what it means to be like a person of color... What do we need to do to ensure people have the support that they need specifically in a grad program setting.” – Participant 002

“Well probably with recruiting, we need to do a better job. I know that a lot of grad programs try to recruit to make their applicants diverse. And I don't want to say that you should not give someone else like a spot, but at the same time I wonder how much these organizations are partnering with like student minority organizations, right? Or like student LGBT organizations, right? Like any sort of diversity that you can add. I don't know what their recruitment is like for reaching out to these programs. And if these people know that these programs are out there, you know what I mean?” – Participant 005

“I feel like if it was taught by someone who didn't have that lens, who didn't think of like just other people, it would just be like a very boring. Like, ‘This is how you build an information retrieval system’ or like ‘These are like the good tenants of it’ and you're not trying to think of like societal structures and how that interacts with them and how that's important.... there's just a higher level of importance and just gives it like a framing of like, ‘Oh, this is important how you should think about it.’” – Participant 003



## Discussion

As it currently stands, there has been little research conducted around the experiences of students of color currently studying library and information science. Even though there are many initiatives and programs intended to support students of color, these students most likely face a number of unique challenges that can make their time within library school difficult. Research shows that student of color face a disproportionate amount of ethnic and racial discrimination from their peers (Suarez-Balcazar, 2003). Despite the fact that this study used a small sample size and cannot be generalizable to the entire population, certain thematic instances that have plagued students of color within higher education and within LIS curriculums are present within the results of this study.

### *Racial and ethnic identity of students is not fully formed*

Ethnic and racial identity (ERI) can be seen as a “multidimensional, psychological construct that reflects the beliefs and attitudes that individuals have about their ethnic–racial group memberships, as well as the processes by which these beliefs and attitudes develop over time” (Umaña-Taylor, 2014, p.3). ERI is developed through an individual’s cultural upbringing, familial status, and general environment (Umaña-Taylor, 2014). However, this process, as well as many other processes around the discovery of one’s ethnic and racial background, is constantly in a state of flux. ERI development is not seen

as linear, but as a status that one can attain and move back and forth through during different stages of one's life (Syed, 2008; 2007).

Because of the varying nature of one's ERI, the students who participated in this project had not reached a level of security, appreciation, and integration of their ERI into their primary identity. Participants description of their ERI as "loaded" (Participant 001) or "complex" (Participant 003) illustrate the oscillation these students may have about their own identities as a student of color. Participant 002 even questioned their own personality and how they "present" because of how students were "walking on eggshells" around them. These students, along with general difficulties of figuring out one's identity, were also being questioned, invalidated, and ostracized due to the isolation that comes with the lack of diversity within their LIS programs.

*Interactions with white students are depleting for students of color*

Due to the lack of diversity within their LIS programs, the students of color who participated in this study had to shoulder additional work, such as educating classmates, colleagues, faculty members on cultural competence. Additionally, their work also encompassed the internal processes required to ignore, "zone out" (Participant 003), and dismiss instances of invalidation and problematic behavior of their white peers. The participants in this study routinely reported that they were "tired" (Participant 001) and felt that they had to "look past" (Participant 004) these instances in order to be able to succeed in within their LIS program. This indicates that these students of color, due to the extra work associated with these instances, are being cognitively depleted of their self-control. According to Bair and Steele (2009), self-control is a limited human resource.

When self-controlling resources are used to compensate for thoughts, behaviors, and emotions, self-control can be diminished and can lead to a cognitive depletion.

This depletion has been measured within students of color who have been shown racist fictional stories (Salvatore & Shelton, 2007), who have had to “smooth things over” with their white peers (Richeson and Trawalter, 2005), and those who have had to expend more resources in ignoring problematic behaviors (Bair and Steele, 2009). Cognitive depletion has been connected to negative academic outcomes such as poor academic performance, low class attendance, and bad studying habits, as well as negative health behaviors such as excessive alcohol intake (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000).

Within this group of participants, the desire of wanting to “smooth things out” with their white peers (Richeson and Trawalter, 2005) and their unsure ERI status could help to explain why many participants saw the upsetting and problematic behaviors within their LIS program as non-discriminatory. These students, who are still oscillating between different levels of acceptance of their ERI, might have felt the need to conform to the white standards of their peers and excuse their problematic behaviors in order to remain socially acceptable and likeable within their master’s program. The mental gymnastics related to this exercise is exhausting at best. These tiring routines are common within the field of librarianship and are mirrored within LIS graduate programs.

*Discriminatory experiences within LIS programs create set foundation for discriminatory experiences in the LIS profession*

Librarians of color routinely have to deal with a number of issues that their white colleagues never have to deal with (St. Lifer and Nelson, 1997). Issues like being ignored, patronized, invalidated and/or dismissed by other library staff (Walker, 2015); additional work around diversity issues; and burnout (Vanscoy & Bright, 2019; Juarez, 2015; Linares and Cunningham, 2018; Alabi, 2018; 2015) are already well documented within the field. The invisible work that librarians of color face in the field are also mirrored within the experiences of the LIS students who participated in this study.

Like librarians of color, the students of color who participated in this study were routinely expected to lead group discussions around race and ethnicity, felt compelled to speak up and intervene during problematic experiences, and work on their own time to build communities and groups for other students of color. This work comes at a cost. Even when these isolated instances of can be seen as positive, or are described as small or insignificant, the accumulation of these experiences can be deleterious. For graduate students of color to be told repeatedly, both verbally and non-verbally, they are not smart, should be questioned, and do not belong, can lead to negative emotional and physical responses such as isolation, depression, anxiety, loss of integrity, and fear (Farrell, 2017; Smith, 2011) and can contribute to early professional burn-out (Alabi, 2015).

Despite these negative experiences, participants within this study also felt like these experiences were helpful insights into what a career in librarianship would be like. Participants were aware of the problems plaguing the field and consistently wondered if they would be a part of the large number of librarians of color who are routinely passed over for promotions, who have to stand up to problematic behaviors and who may the

exit the field pre-maturely. Participants saw these experiences within their LIS master's program as a training ground where they could learn from their problematic experiences with classmates and use this knowledge and experience within their future careers.

*Tiptoeing around racist values within librarianship*

Participants within this study felt that their white colleagues, classmates, and professors were ill-equipped and uncomfortable when they talked about race. Psychology research indicates that white people work mentally very hard when interacting with people of color, “particularly when the norms of the context or their personal values dictate egalitarian behavior,” (Richeson, 2005, p.338) and that those with higher levels of racial implicit bias exude more behaviors associated with discomfort (McConnell and Leibold, 2001).

In 2005, LIS Scholar Todd Honma asked, “Why is it that scholars and students do not talk openly and honestly about issues of race and LIS? Why does the field have a tendency to tiptoe around discussing race and racism, and instead limit the discourse by using words such as ‘multiculturalism’ and ‘diversity (p.2)?’” Librarianship is viewed as an “egalitarian institution (Honma, 2005, p.3)” that purports free knowledge and access to knowledge to all. However, the egalitarian values of the profession and the noble actions of librarians to be stewards of this system inherently ignores the implicit racial bias within the system itself.

Libraries are seen as noble institutions, rooted in ideals of egalitarianism and democracy (Sierpe, 2019), however these notions fail to critically examine the history of



institutionalized racism within library systems. According to Amelia Gibson, “LIS has a history of weaponizing civility, neutrality, and silence as a cover for marginalization (Gibson, 2019; p. 3) Libraries, like schools, train stations and other public places, were segregated institutions until the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Segregated Libraries, 2020). Public library construction for white citizens started in the United States in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the American Library Association (ALA) was founded in 1876 (Weigand, 2017). During that time, the ALA held many of the same values around knowledge and access as it does today. However, it actively chose to look past, ignore, and tiptoe around the segregation of libraries and the disenfranchisement of black librarians (Weigand, 2017).

For example, in 1936, the ALA allowed for black librarians to attend the yearly conference that was being held in Richmond, Virginia. However, these librarians were expected to sit in segregated sections of meeting halls and were not allowed to attend meals or exhibits. After the conference concluded, the ALA received letters asking why black librarians were forced to sit in segregated spaces or leave during mealtimes (Ruhig, 1986). The ALA responded by saying that they were just following bureaucratic local and state ordinances, instead of taking “the responsibility of an association to seek for its members the elementary right of equal protection under the law (A History of the American Library Association: 1876-1972, p.132).” In later ALA conferences, LIS historian Rosemary Ruhig states that “The continual desire by some to reconsider the issue of equal access to convention activities underscores the limited level of commitment apparent in all aspects of librarianship as it has related to blacks. Eliza

Gleason, in discussing public library service to blacks, noted in 1945 that segregation ‘has never come up for more than limited discussion (Ruhig, 1986, p.498).’”

Problematic situations are bound to happen again if they are not actively addressed. Based on the interviews, it almost feels like history is repeating itself. The actions purported against black folks in the early 1900s are not dissimilar from the situations students of color are facing within LIS master’s program today. Participants within this study also cited inactions around diversity due to bureaucracy and also lamented on the limited discussions on race within their LIS master’s programs.

On an individual level, it can also be argued that white librarians willfully ignore their own implicit racial bias. Within librarianship, whiteness is the norm and works as an invisible structure (Honma, 2005) that holds up classroom dynamics that situate the students of color in this study into problematic and unrealistic molds. While in LIS programs, these students must simultaneously defend themselves, defend their culture, defend their place within librarianship and defend their identity; all while also being gracious enough to extend themselves in ways that de-value who they are in order to educate and inform their white peers. Within library school, these biases and unrealistic expectations held of students of color remain unchecked. Despite these students of color best efforts to empathetically engage and educate their white peers, they know that they will still “hurt someone else” (Participant 004) within their professional career.

### *Solutions*

Like Franklin and Jaeger suggest, “interventions to improve diversity in LIS should happen in multiple aspects of the field if there is any chance of success... All

aspects of diversity in the field depend on one another. Trying to recruit more diverse master's students may seem like an easy solution to diversity, but it will not be sufficient to succeed (Jaeger & Subramainian, 2011, p. 174; Franklin & Jaeger, 2009).” Current programs like the ALA’s Spectrum Scholarship and the ARL’s Mosaic Program are one piece of a part in making librarianship truly diverse, but without additional foundations that support people of color within all aspects of librarianship, diversity initiatives act as a tiny, flimsy band-aid for a huge problem.

Participants in the study explicitly suggested a number of solutions to help with racial and ethnic diversity and inclusion within their library science master’s program. These solutions included supporting students with better resources and faculty, better recruitment of students of color and grounding teaching within real-world and practical experience.

### **Support**

Participants stated that there needed to be better institutional support at the school-level to support staff, faculty, and student well-being. Participant 002 suggested things like international student coordinators, more student services staff, and better classroom support for students of color. The participant also felt like their institution over-relied on students to do the bulk of the diversity and inclusion work, instead of faculty and staff who had expertise in that area and were also compensated fairly enough to do so.

### **Recruitment**

Students also felt like there needed to be better, more thoughtful recruitment to attract more students of color to their respective LIS programs. Participant 005 felt that

representation of a more diverse student body would help with diversity initiatives within the field. Participant 004 felt like their school needed to commit to recruitment initiatives to bring in more student and faculty members of color, instead of discussing it at length with little impactful decisions.

### **Practical Experience**

Participants stated that having what they learned and discussed in class applied to real world scenarios made their work more realistic and impactful. Participant 004 felt like understanding how concepts could be applied to people with differentiating information needs helped them to better understand the need of diversity within librarianship, and also more wholistic learning experiences in the classroom.

### **A Culture Shift**

These suggestions are beneficial and are a needed-step in increasing inclusivity in the field of librarianship. However, they do not directly address the toxic whitewashing of the culture and institution of librarianship. A culture shift within how libraries and librarians are viewed must happen in order for the profession to move towards a path that is more accepting and inclusive of people of color. Libraries and LIS curriculums should look inward to understand how problematic and racist narratives have shaped our field.

Shattering the illusion that libraries are a bastion of egalitarianism and free thought should be the first step. A better understanding of the history of libraries and how they worked to disenfranchise different cultures, how they excluded black folks and other people of color from the benefits, and how those systems affect librarianship today need to be presented in classrooms within LIS programs. Allowing for critical look at how and why these structures were built can help librarians to understand the gravity and necessity

of diversity within LIS. Additionally, this can help students understand and better combat the systems of whiteness that are pervasive within the field.

Along with this critical introspection of the histories of libraries, library pedagogy should be taught from a perspective of radical justice and or critical race philosophy. Placing greater importance on the perspectives and needs of those who have been historically disenfranchised from librarianship would help the field be more inclusive, and would also give students, especially those of color, a way to see how librarianship and the access of information can affects people's lives.

To do this well in the classroom, the administration of LIS programs need to take a hands-on approach in real and meaningful inclusion work. What this looks like is more funding and staff time devoted to doing this work in the classroom, as well as the ability to bring in a more diverse staff to better teach students. Additionally, more funding, mentorship, and guidance should be provided for out-of-classroom learning experiences that help support students explore these ideas outside of their regular school structure.

### *Further Research*

Further research is absolutely necessary to understand the full range of experiences students of color face within LIS master's programs. More interviews should be conducted with a larger and more diverse participant population. For future interviews, diverse participants do not just apply to the race and ethnicity of a participant, but should also account for: other intersectional identities, method of LIS curriculum delivery (in person versus online), the age of LIS students, and students' prior work experience. All

of these facets could potentially play a role in the identity of these students and could also be indicators for success within a LIS graduate program.

Additionally, future projects should also aim to understand the experiences of international LIS students of color. Students who travel abroad to attend a ALA-accredited institutions in the United States and Canada face a unique experience of being new to not just a graduate degree program, but to a culture at large. This study did not interview any international students, but their perspectives and experiences are absolutely necessary to create a more inclusive field.

Lastly, further study should be invested in the connections between identity and discrimination within Library and Information science master's students. Further exploration of these students' identities, especially from a psychological standpoint, could be helpful in understanding how these students perceive themselves and their place within librarianship. Understanding identity and how it impacts ideas of discrimination within librarianship could also be useful in understanding the process of librarianship burn out and turn over within librarians of color.

## Conclusion

In a perfect world, libraries are based in the anti-capitalist goal that information should be free to all. However, we do not live in a perfect world. Libraries, even though they are generally regarded as noble institutions, were built with the intention to perpetuate systemic inequalities throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beyond. Even though this is an issue that goes to the core of the entire field, it needs to be examined so we, as current students and professionals, can learn from the mistakes that have been made.

It is reasonable to believe that the toxic patterns that perpetuate these systems start in library school. Students of color have to work through mentally taxing issues connected with their race and ethnicity during their time in LIS programs. White students, like white colleagues in the library profession, do not realize the amount of extra work placed on their colleagues who do not look like them. Based on the results of this project, students were routinely expected to do extra work that could be detrimental to their school performance, their mental health and their overall opinion of the field of librarianship.

Master's programs should do everything possible to mitigate these experiences for students of color by taking actionable and bold steps within the structure of their schools. They should apply more direct support to things that impact students of color's experience during school, such as additional funding for both curricular and extra-curricular endeavors around inclusivity, funding and administrative support for staff who

are doing this work, and better recruitment of a more diverse students and faculty. However, the entire culture of librarianship must also change. The priorities and pedagogic style of LIS master's programs need to reflect the critical goals and values of inclusion and diversity to make the field more equitable. This means teaching the core foundations of library and information science with a stronger framework of inclusion, radical justice, and critical race theory.



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## Appendix I: Recruitment Materials



## Appendix II: Interview Guide

### **Push or Pull: Students of Color Experience within Library and Information Science Master's Programs**

**Purpose:** To understand how instances of discrimination within LIS programs affects students of color classroom experiences and opinions of the profession overall.

**Population:** Students of color in LIS Masters programs.

**Introduction:** Thank you for agreeing to speak with me today. We are conducting research by interviewing students of color about instances of discrimination within library and information science master's programs. This research is for a final master's paper for the University of North Carolina's Schools of Information and Library Science. I would like to ask you some questions about your experiences student of color enrolled in an ALA-accredited master's program. There are no right or wrong answers. If there are any questions that make you feel uncomfortable, feel free to tell me and we can skip or come back to those questions. Also, anything that you say today will be confidential and the perspectives you provide will not be linked or identifiable to you. There are no repercussions for not participating in the study and you may stop the study at any time. Would you like to proceed, and if so, do you have any questions before we begin?

### **Research Question 1: How do Library and Information Science students of color define discrimination?**

1. What does being a "student of color" mean to you?
  - a. How do you identify racially/and or ethnically?
  - b. In your own words, how would you define the phrase "student of color"?
  - c. How important is your racial/ethnic identity to you?
  - d. How do you think being a person of color impacts your graduate student experience?
  
2. How do Library and Information Science students of color define discrimination?
  - a. How would you define discrimination?
  - b. Can you give me some examples of what you think discrimination means?
  - c. When you think of discrimination, how do you feel?

**Research Question 2: What are some instances of discrimination LIS students of color have experienced?**

1. Situation-specific
  - a. Describe the racial/ethnic diversity in your master's program.
2. Person-specific discrimination:
  - a. Describe an experience in your master's program(or grad school career) that has been positive because you are a student of color.
  - b. Describe an experience in your masters program that has been negative because you are a student of color?
    - i. Probe: How did you feel about the experience?
    - ii. Probe: How did you respond to this experience?
    - iii. Probe: Did you turn to any other individuals within your program – such as classmates, professors or administrators – for support after this experience?
    - iv. Probe: How do you think this scenario would have played out if you were white?

**Research Question 3: How have instances of discrimination affect students of color experiences in LIS school?**

- c. How have instances discrimination impacted your LIS masters program experience?
- d. Have your expectations or ideas about pursuing a career in librarianship/information science changed since after entering your master's program?
- e. Are there any other experiences or instances you like to share with me that you where you feel that your race or ethnicity has played a significant role in the experience?

**Closing Comments: We've reached the end of the interview. Do you have any further thoughts or questions? Thank you very much for sharing your experiences with me today.**