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"You can't read your way out of racism": Creating anti-racist action out of education in an academic library

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Abstract

Purpose

Under the transformational leadership of the University Librarian, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Libraries shifted from having an education- and programming-based "diversity committee" to a council of librarians advocating for action, anti-racism, and social justice, both within our organization and across campus. As our University Librarian noted, "you can't read your way out of racism."

Approach

With support from library leadership, the Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Accessibility (IDEA) Council has advanced anti-racism work in the libraries by serving as facilitators for a book discussion series, organizing a 21-day racial equity challenge, supporting staff in integrating anti-racism practices into their daily work through brown bag conversations, and facilitating the development of inclusion-focused performance management goals.

Findings

What does an anti-racist library look like, and how does our organization envision this future? These questions anchor the IDEA Council's strategies. The libraries have witnessed a positive shift in staff participation: two-thirds of library staff participated in a Racial Equity Institute Groundwater presentation and in a library-wide book discussion series; approximately half the staff committed to our 21-day racial equity challenge. Participants were asked to reflect in conversation and through surveys.

Originality/value

The first wave of a newly established grant program funded eight staff-led projects to advance social justice in the libraries. Additional steps included caucusing by racial identity, staff-wide discussions about racial equity, and a second wave of funding for the grant program. We approach this work with cultural humility: seeking to learn from one another, our peers, and fellow activists.

Keywords

Anti-racism
Cultural humility
Diversity committee
Staff development

Paper type

Viewpoint paper

Introduction

"You can't read your way out of racism," noted Elaine Westbrooks, Vice Provost for University Libraries and University Librarian at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH), during her address at the *University Librarians & Black Lives Matter* panel at the Triangle Research Libraries Network Annual Meeting in July 2020. With the summer of racial reckoning in full swing—following the murder of George Floyd—academic institutions and libraries the world over urgently issued statements expressing renewed commitments to diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (Yeager, 2020). Westbrooks's call to action for the UNC-CH University Libraries to reckon with systemic racism and oppression steers away from a surface-level reference to diversity-related values and instead incorporates language that marks whiteness and white supremacy. She draws attention to the library "systems [that] implicitly and explicitly perpetuate inequity because they have been traditionally centered on whiteness and patriarchy as a default" and asking library professionals to dismantle those systems (Westbrooks, 2020).

For the UNC-CH University Libraries, Westbrooks—from the beginning of her tenure—realized a critical need to intervene in white supremacist culture and the way it materializes in the organization. And yet, culture holds immense influence and power. As Tema Okun notes, "culture is powerful precisely because it is so present and at the same time very difficult to name or identify" (n.d. p.1). Indeed, institutions and people reinforce and normalize white supremacy culture in everyday behaviors, from perfectionism and defensiveness to paternalism and power hoarding (Okun n.d.). Of course, there are multiple pathways toward intervention, including the various antidotes outlined by Okun. Westbrooks activated and recharged one of

UNC-CH Libraries' longstanding committees, the diversity programming and education committee, as a critical first step in advancing equity and inclusion in the organization.

Under the transformational leadership of the University Librarian, therefore, UNC-CH University Libraries shifted from having an education- and programming-based "diversity committee" to a council of library workers advocating for action, anti-racism, and social justice, within both the organization and across campus. During the 2020–2021 academic year, equipped with a new name and charge, the Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Accessibility (IDEA) Council sprang into immediate action to advance anti-racism work in the libraries. Its members began by serving as facilitators for a book discussion series, organizing a 21-day racial equity challenge, supporting staff in integrating anti-racism practices into their daily work through brown bag conversations, and facilitating the development of inclusion-focused performance management goals.

As we reflect on the work of the IDEA Council, we realize that there is so much more that needs to be done. This article comes during a moment of immense strife and frustration for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; and to be sure, it comes in a long line of difficult moments. The UNC Board of Trustees initially failed to vote on tenure for Nikole Hannah-Jones, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, MacArthur fellow, and Carolina alumna (Robertson, 2021). After much debate and political struggle, the Board eventually voted to grant Hannah-Jones tenure, but she declined the overdue offer and accepted an endowed, tenured professorship in Race and Journalism at Howard University (Killian, 2021 July 6). BIPOC faculty and staff have continued to leave in droves for more welcoming, inclusive, and equitable opportunities elsewhere (Chang *et*

al., 2021; Killian, 2021 June 14). The UNC System reached a $2.5 million settlement agreement with the Sons of Confederate Veterans for the activist-toppled Confederate monument (Li, 2019); after intense public pressure and an ensuing legal battle, this agreement was eventually overturned (Wamsley, 2020). In short, the institutional context makes it difficult, and all the more necessary, for the IDEA Council and the University Libraries to do the work of reckoning—accounting for our past, while seeking an equitable way forward.

This raises the question: what does an anti-racist library look like at a historically white and racist institution? In attempting to imagine possible answers to that question, in this article we explore the following related questions: W*hat is true action? How is change measured? Who is the IDEA Council accountable to? Who is centered in this work?* Neat and tidy answers to these questions are not the goal. As David Hudson encourages, "we might craft alternate spaces of anti-racist critical practice in our field through purposeful challenges to such imperatives, through the recognition of the value of questions without answers and the value of language that pushes beyond common-sense meanings" (2017, p. 206). Perhaps most importantly, we approach this work with cultural humility: seeking to learn from one another, our peers, and fellow activists.

Our understanding of cultural humility draws on the definition laid out by Hurley *et al.,* who write, "Cultural humility involves the ability to maintain an interpersonal stance that is other oriented in relation to aspects of cultural identity that are most important to the other person, the ability to recognize the context in which interactions occur, and a commitment to redress power imbalances and other structural issues to benefit all parties" (2019). The last part of this definition is of particular importance, as the libraries seek to intervene in the systemic

inequities upon which the institution is built. We share the following reflections and actionable steps to help others move forward, disrupt, and intervene, and affect change within libraries, archives, and beyond.

Diversity Committee Reimagined

A brief history

In late 2006, the University Libraries at UNC-CH established a diversity task force that transitioned into a standing diversity committee two years later. The newly formed committee kicked off with a diversity climate survey of library employees and developed goal recommendations rooted in UNC-CH's "5 Diversity Goals" as part of the university's 2006–2010 Diversity Plan (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2006). The university's diversity goals appear to use a business case model by incorporating language such as "achieve the critical masses of minority populations necessary *to ensure the educational benefits* of diversity in faculty, staff, students and executive, administrative and managerial positions" (emphasis our own). The business case model argues that "diversity, properly managed, can lead to cost savings, a talented workforce, and business prosperity" (O'Leary and Weathington, 2006, p. 287), but it often neglects to consider whether an organization's environment is hospitable to this "diversity" it so desperately seeks.

In this regard, diversity is viewed as a resource that ensures capital gains and benefits for the institution and its overwhelmingly white population (O'Leary and Weathington, 2006; College Factual, 2021). As Brown, Cline, and Méndez-Brady note, "[w]hen diversity is treated as a resource, institutional conversations focus on how a more diverse population might improve the quality of the institutional experience, and as a result, institutions can measure their

success based on quantifiable metrics rather than critical self-reflection" (2021, p. 99). The use of diversity rhetoric in the university's statement seemingly was employed to benefit the institution and administration, rather than its employees; Ettarh asserts that we must move beyond this rhetoric (2014). UNC-CH's 2006-2010 Diversity Plan or the language used therein almost certainly does not consider the needs of current and potential BIPOC staff, faculty, and students. Tokenizing language, moreover, continues to surface at the university (Richards, 2021).

Changes afoot

In summer 2017, Elaine Westbrooks became the University Librarian and Vice Provost for University Libraries at UNC-Chapel Hill (https://library.unc.edu/about/director/). The Diversity Programming and Education Committee (DPEC) met with Westbrooks—the first committee to do so—upon her start at the libraries. For its part, the DPEC, which the authors joined in 2017, attempted to provide programs, training, and other educational opportunities directly aimed at library staff, including a summer film series focused on diversity-related topics and webinar viewings. Westbrooks tasked the committee to complete two deliverables: 1) to conduct an environmental scan of diversity and inclusion related activities at UNC-CH, both within and outside of the library, and 2) to conduct interviews with academic libraries at peer institutions that employ a "diversity officer" type position. (The latter eventually resulted in Figueroa's position as Librarian for Inclusive Excellence and membership on the library leadership team.) At the same time, five new Associate University Librarians were hired at the libraries—four BIPOC women and one white woman—marking a seismic shift from a previously all-white library leadership team.

During the following year, Figueroa began serving as chair of the DPEC and guided the committee through a complete rewrite of the library's diversity statement—a statement that previously relied upon platitudes of pluralism and multiculturalism, centered whiteness, even if not named explicitly, and glossed over action. The original statement read:

> The University Library affirms the University's core values regarding diversity, inclusion, and multiculturalism. The University Library is committed, through its policies, practices, programs, collections, and services, to creating and fostering an environment of inclusion, equity, non-discrimination, and pluralism, grounded in respect and appreciation for all, and promoting and celebrating individual and collective achievement. (University Libraries n.d.).

Brown, Cline, and Méndez-Brady discuss the problematic nature of academic library diversity statements, indeed citing the UNC-Chapel Hill University Libraries' statement as particularly egregious in its "respect and appreciation for all" sentiments (2021, p. 100). While the current iteration of the library's statement still refuses to name whiteness and racism, it does separate the critical work being undertaken in the libraries from that being done elsewhere on campus and points to possibilities for change. The current statement reads:

> The University Libraries at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill is committed to creating a community that is inclusive, open, and equitable for all. As an organization, we lead with trust, respect, and integrity. We embrace the contributions of every individual while also celebrating our collective achievements. The University's founding principles—Lux, Libertas—guide our efforts to build bridges and to lead change (IDEA Council 2019).

Just as the library's diversity statement was reconceptualized, so too was the committee charged to lead this work.

From DPEC to IDEA Council

At the behest of Westbrooks, the work of the Diversity Programming and Education Committee (DPEC) was reimagined to move beyond educational programming. Renamed the Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Accessibility (IDEA) Council, the committed group of library workers drafted a value statement and charge:

> The University Libraries Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Accessibility (IDEA) Council recognizes that inclusion is at the center of a thriving and innovative workforce. The IDEA Council is invested in building a welcoming and equitable environment for all library employees and library users. In support of this goal, the Council rejects the concept of library neutrality and embraces the values of social justice and anti-oppression as a framework for affecting constructive change.
>
> The Council acknowledges that this work is challenging and at times uncomfortable but encourages all library employees to lean into this discomfort and approach difficult conversations with honesty, respect, empathy, and an openness to other perspectives. Everyone in the University Libraries has a part to play in building and maintaining a culture of inclusivity (IDEA Council, 2019).

Along with a new charge, the membership structure of the council changed from an appointment solicited annually through a library-wide interest survey, to targeted recruitment of committee members. This new structure allows for greater continuity and more in-depth work among council members. It should be noted that during the implementation process

current members of the then-named DPEC were given the opportunity to remain on the newly formed IDEA Council or to leave to seek other service opportunities in the libraries.

Simultaneously, educational opportunities related to equity and inclusion in the libraries shifted away from free webinar viewings to more in-depth professional and personal development. Funds were increasingly allocated to build an anti-racist workforce, such as covering the cost of registration for library staff to attend the Phase I and II Workshops offered by the Racial Equity Institute (REI), which offers trainings for individuals and organizations to "develop tools to challenge patterns of power and grow equity" to help build racially equitable systems and organizations (Racial Equity Institute). These workshops provide a foundational understanding of race and racial equity within the United States. Initially, registration for members of the library leadership team, department heads group, and the IDEA Council was prioritized, but the library subsequently opened this training opportunity to all interested employees.

In January 2020, the IDEA Council hosted an REI Groundwater presentation for University Libraries staff. In this presentation, REI organizers utilize "groundwater" as a metaphor to help participants "internalize the reality that [they] live in a racially structured society," and only by confronting this reality can "[they] begin to unlock transformative change." The organization, moreover, notes three observations associated with this metaphor: 1) "racial inequity looks the same across systems, 2) socio-economic difference does not explain the racial inequity, and 3) inequities are caused by systems, regardless of people's culture or behavior" (Racial Equity Institute). Understanding (and internalizing) the groundwater metaphor is crucial to realizing systemic and lasting change. Attendance at the presentation

included the Vice Provost for University Libraries and University Librarian, all members of the Library Leadership Team, and 140 other members of staff (approximately 52%; all staff were invited to participate). IDEA Council members who previously had attended REI workshops helped to manage service desks during the four-hour training time.

In October 2018, the IDEA Council began a brown bag lunch series. Library employees were invited to share about experiences conducting work through an IDEA lens. The brown bags were structured such that half of the allotted time was spent on speaker presentations, with the other half taken up by discussions about how to incorporate similar actions into participants' own work at the libraries. Topics ranged from changing harmful and outdated subject headings and supporting BIPOC students in the STEM disciplines to feminist and critical pedagogy and building a gender-inclusive organization. Those brown bags saw an average of thirty participants per event, a number two- to three-times larger than an average webinar viewing.

Changes to library leadership and the IDEA Council laid the groundwork for further and more in-depth anti-racist action in the University Libraries. The global pandemic and racial reckoning of 2020 would bring about a reckoning within the libraries.

Reckoning at the Libraries

On June 1, 2020, Elaine Westbrooks launched the University Libraries' Reckoning Initiative in a call to action to staff and the public (Westbrooks, 2020). Catalyzed by the killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor (among many other Black and Brown people), Westbrooks's statement and the Reckoning Initiative spurred a deeper commitment to anti-racism and racial equity work in the University Libraries—work that goes beyond a mere focus on diversity. Far

too often, institutions, including academic libraries, make empty statements of solidarity that draw upon the language of diversity and inclusion but fall short of real transformation in the workplace. As Sara Ahmed notes:

> Universities often describe their missions by drawing on the languages of diversity as well as equality. But using the language does not translate into creating diverse or equal environments. This 'not translation' is something we experience: it is a gap between symbolic commitment and a lived reality. Commitments might even be made because they do not bring something about. Indeed, equality and diversity can be used as masks to create the appearance of being transformed (2017, p. 90).

Racialized labor and inequitable labor practices are regularly implicated within these types of statements. As Brown, Cline, and Méndez-Brady (2021) write, "Libraries routinely rely on the skills, expertise, and experience of BIPOC in order to further institutional diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) goals" (p. 102). We would be remiss not to mention that our organization's statement of reckoning was drafted by a Black woman.

Anti-racism and racial equity work—the work of reckoning—requires us to mark the reality of race, racism, whiteness, and white supremacy, not just self-education or empty rhetoric-filled statements. But what does it mean to reckon? The University Libraries have come to understand this term and the work involved to be largely about taking account of what we have done and what we have failed to do as an organization. Our institution operates within unjust, racist, and oppressive systems, and regardless of who was responsible for creating these systems, as an organization we have a responsibility to identify, disrupt, and build them anew.

The work of Reckoning is framed under five focus areas that overlap and intersect: 1) Education and training; 2) Programmatic work; 3) Systems analysis, intervention, and change strategy; 4) Integrating anti-racism practices into library work; and 5) Tracking and assessing inclusion, diversity, equity, accessibility, and anti-racism work (University Libraries, 2021). The IDEA Council is front and center within this framework, as it organizes education and training opportunities, facilitates conversations about racial equity in libraries and archives, encourages in-depth analysis of library systems, and provides feedback on performance goals devoted to equity and inclusion. The following section documents steps that the IDEA Council and the University Libraries have taken toward becoming an anti-racist organization.

Annual performance goals

As preparation began for the university's 2020/2021 annual review cycle, the libraries announced that all staff would be required to include an IDEA-related goal in their yearly performance plan. Library departments also established department-wide goals related to equity and inclusion, such as monthly discussion groups. Figueroa, alongside the Director of Library Human Resources, held sessions for library staff to prepare and brainstorm possible goals. During these sessions, library-developed definitions for inclusion, diversity, equity, and accessibility were shared and an emphasis was placed on performance goals that focused on action, rather than exclusively professional development. At the time of the writing, the library is currently amid the annual review process, which will see an evaluation of stated IDEA goals and the further development of such performance goals for the next review year.

Working with a consultant

In July 2020, the University Libraries hired Dr. Allison De Marco as a consultant to support the organization's anti-racist efforts. De Marco holds an MSW and PhD in Social Welfare and is a UNC-CH Advanced Research Scientist and adjunct assistant professor in the School of Social Work. She is also a coordinator of Orange County Organizing Against Racism and co-facilitator of the group's white anti-racism caucus. In November 2020, Dr. De Marco developed a baseline employee survey on racism and racial equity to guide future work in the library. While all library staff were invited to participate in the survey, participation remained optional and voluntary. Responses to the survey were relatively high, with 186 staff members responding (62% of staff) and generally positive, with respondents somewhat agreeing to strongly agreeing to statements such as "*I think it is valuable to examine and discuss the impacts of race*" and "*Leadership is fully committed to racial equity*." De Marco also provided anti-racist facilitation training to the library leadership team, IDEA Council, IDEA Action Committee (explained below), and self-nominated members of the library department heads group. She is currently working closely with Figueroa, the library leadership team, and the IDEA Council to develop racial equity action plans within departments and teams.

IDEA Action grant program

In August 2020, the IDEA Action Committee was formed to create an inclusive and equitable process of allocating resources to library staff focused on initiating and advancing social justice and anti-racist work in and for the libraries. Choosing the committee's moniker was crucial: *action* was incorporated to emphasize the importance of moving beyond education and *IDEA* to create a clear connection to the language and work of the IDEA Council. As part of the Reckoning Initiative, the grant program is currently allocated a two-year budget (FY20/21–

FY21/22) of up to $250,000 to fund projects within the libraries. Intersections between the IDEA Action Committee and the IDEA Council abound: the grant funding committee is led by Shawgo, a long-term IDEA Council member with Figueroa, IDEA Council chair, and another IDEA Council member serving in committee roles.

The IDEA Action Committee members were selected by Shawgo (chair) and Figueroa (ex-officio) from a list of library employees recommended to the pair by members of the library leadership team tasked with nominating potential members. One additional committee member was selected at large from a self-nomination process for a total of ten committee members. Employees who self-nominated but were not selected for the committee were given the opportunity to take part in a facilitation training workshop led by Dr. De Marco. Library location, roles, employment status, and demographics were considered when choosing potential committee members.

The IDEA Action Committee administers the grants program, including drafting the call for proposals, establishing selection criteria, creating assessment protocols, reviewing the budget, and maintaining communications among the committee and awardees—essentially all tasks needed to make a grant funding program operational. Additionally, IDEA Action Committee members serve as quasi “program officers” who use their expertise to engage individuals and groups in effective project creation. The committee provides informational discussions, ideation sessions, and in-depth pre- and post-proposal meetings. Information about the program was also shared on the library staff’s Reckoning Initiative intranet.

As a starting point, in Fall 2020 the committee identified in-process IDEA project teams who could benefit from accelerating funds. This identification resulted in the funding of eight

distinct projects: 1) *On the Books: Jim Crow and the Algorithms of Resistance*, a project which uses machine learning to identify Jim Crow laws passed in North Carolina and creates a searchable database, 2) a conscious editing style guide for archival material, 3) the creation of equitable, inclusive, and accessible oral history transcription practices, 4) an update and evaluation of the Carolina campus "Black and Blue tour" a tour of Black history at the university, 4) the translation of two library exhibitions into the languages of the communities represented by displayed materials, 6) the prioritization of digitization efforts for Black-owned North Carolina newspapers, 7) a revision and improvement to descriptive practices for special collections materials, and 8) the creation of a 3-D rendering of a North Carolina map. The funds distributed to each of the eight projects ranged from $299 to $5100. The IDEA Action grant program and details of its first wave of funded projects were then shared publicly. Spring 2021 witnessed the launch of the second wave of proposal submissions, with proposals being reviewed at the time of writing. Reflecting on the process, the committee determined that subsequent proposals will be accepted on a rolling basis, rather than a cyclical one, going forward.

This program marked a significant financial investment into racial equity work and moved the libraries away from the often-empty words of anti-racism statements and toward action. Through this and other Reckoning Initiative programs, we are encouraging library staff to critically engage with current policies and practices and to find new methods to make them more equitable, inclusive, and anti-racist. We ultimately want everyone to see their work through the lens of IDEA, but we also recognize we are early in our analysis as an organization. Despite increasing knowledge through our book discussions and 21-day racial equity challenge

(both described below), not all library staff possess the same foundational knowledge or racial equity lens and still see IDEA as something separate from their library work.

Book Discussion

In early fall 2020, the University Libraries undertook a staff-wide book discussion of *How to be An Antiracist* (2019) by Dr. Ibram X. Kendi. Personal copies of Dr. Kendi's text were made available to all library staff, including student employees, and library leadership encouraged all staff to participate in the discussion series. Potential facilitators were solicited from library leadership, IDEA Council, IDEA Action Committee, and additional self-selecting staff members. Subsequently, Dr. De Marco provided identified facilitators with two sessions of anti-racist facilitation training. Ultimately, 22 facilitators, including six IDEA Council members, led seven facilitation groups with three or four facilitators per group. A total of 219 permanent library staff participated (84.6% of permanent staff), as did three student employees. Participants self-selected their groups, and each group met for five sessions between September 2020 and January 2021. Figueroa coordinated the program, including the selection of discussion questions and additional optional readings. Facilitators were given the flexibility to revise discussion questions for their specific group but were encouraged to emphasize how conceptual discussions could and should apply to library work.

Anonymous participant surveys were conducted after the first discussion session and at the conclusion of the series. Initial feedback spurred debriefing sessions with facilitators and guided planning for subsequent discussions. Library staff feedback was overwhelmingly positive, although not without criticism, which ranged from remarks that it was not appropriate to discuss racism in the workplace to BIPOC employees sharing the harm caused by moments

that centered white colleagues learning about and processing race and racism in their presence. Despite these criticisms, the book discussions were a huge success that demonstrated a willingness among library staff to engage in anti-racist library efforts with one another. The first highly visible action under the Reckoning Initiative, this book discussion series laid the groundwork towards a shared analysis and understanding as a whole library. And while we cannot read our way out of racism, personal growth through education is needed to propel racial equity work forward. Reading and discussing Dr. Kendi's book allowed for library workers to undertake that learning together.

21-Day Racial Equity Challenge

In April and May 2021, drawing on the success of the *How to Be An Antiracist* book discussion series, the University Libraries launched a daily habit-forming challenge that centered racial equity in libraries, archives, and information science. Led and organized by members of the IDEA Council, selected daily topics ranging from dismantling white supremacy in libraries and archives, to critical race theory in the profession, to centering BIPOC voices, to celebrating BIPOC joy and creativity. Participants were encouraged to engage with a wide variety of resources across multiple media—articles to read, webinars to watch, podcasts to listen to, and critical questions to reflect upon. Samples of challenge day resources can be found in Appendix A.

With support from library leadership and management, over 160 library staff (61.7% of staff) registered for this optional learning opportunity. Participants received daily email posts via the University Libraries intranet site. Each post included easily scannable color-coded tags, such as #library-wide and #special_collections, that organized resources according to research

area, focus, or service. Approximate times to finish were included to provide participants with appropriate time expectations for engagement.

The libraries hosted three library-wide open conversation hours over the course of the 21-day challenge that were co-facilitated by Figueroa and Shawgo. These sessions invited participants to reflect on critical questions that arose from their engagement with challenging resources. Each session included a Google Jamboard for anonymous participation and reflection. Sample reflection questions included: How does acknowledging your privilege make you feel? Who is leaned on to undertake anti-racism work in libraries and archives? How is anti-racism work valued?

In addition to participating in library-wide discussions, the IDEA Council encouraged staff to take part in department-level conversations and library-organized caucus or affinity-group conversations. Peer-led ethnic caucus discussions provided participants with the opportunity to explore beliefs, emotions, and self-reflections within a safe (and brave) setting. As readers may be aware, “racial identity caucusing provides a safer space where white people can talk without fear of offending people of color, and people of color can talk without the burden of rationalizing and proving the validity of their experiences to white people” (Organizing Against Racism). Another goal of racial identity caucusing is to return “to the overall collective better equipped to take up the task of building an anti-racist community” (Crossroads, p. 7). Continued interrogation of our internalized racist oppression experienced by BIPOC people, as well as internalized racist superiority experienced by white people, will create a foundation for coming together on shared goals. Building an anti-racist organization cannot be achieved without solidarity.

We held two meetings each for the BIPOC caucus and the white people caucus. IDEA Council members facilitated these discussions, with Figueroa leading the BIPOC caucus and Shawgo co-facilitating the white people caucus. Overall, reception was overwhelmingly positive, although turnout waned slightly from the first meeting to the second. These meetings were not without challenges, however; for instance, for the white people caucus, not all participants operated under a shared analysis of racial equity. In turn, this lack of a shared foundational understanding made accountability, calling-in, and deep conversation difficult to achieve. The BIPOC caucus, while a safe space for venting frustrations and expressing joy, especially in the wake of the Derek Chauvin trial results, included fewer participants in managerial roles, which is indicative of a larger issue within the libraries and the profession. We will continue to push against these challenges and work toward forging true solidarity as caucusing continues in our libraries.

Reflections and conclusion

On centering

As we reflect on the IDEA Council's work, we find ourselves returning to the questions that anchor it: what does an anti-racist library look like, and how does our organization envision this future? Indeed, the libraries have witnessed a positive shift in staff participation for educational and training opportunities, from REI workshops and presentations to library-wide book discussions and habit-forming conversations. Library staff have exhibited a new-found willingness to participate in conversations about race, privilege, white supremacy, and racism. During the Libraries' 21-day Racial Equity Challenge, for instance, staff were explicitly asked how it made them feel to acknowledge their privilege. Participants responded in a variety of

ways, but several comments speak to a heightened awareness that was not present prior to engaging with equity-focused resources: *"more aware;" "how unaware I am;" "more aware of so many things;" "seeing my privilege more frequently and in different situations;" "aware of all the challenges that other people have to overcome that I don't."* This awareness and growth must be embraced —our organization cannot (and will not) move forward in a holistic manner without it.

As a group of committed library workers, the IDEA Council is not without fault or criticism. The current iteration of the council consists of seven white members, two BIPOC members, and only one individual holding a para-professional position. It is almost exclusively a female-identifying group, except for one person. We talk openly and freely about race and racism, but our perspectives are certainly not the same. The council realizes that the work of racial equity within the library cannot (nor should not) fall on the shoulders of one group of staff members, or one person, or the very small number of BIPOC employees. For true transformational change, we need equitable engagement from all library employees.

Most if not all of the educational opportunities organized by the council center whiteness and white people's learning. Indeed, the comments on awareness (italicized above) speak to this. BIPOC folks seemingly navigate the world with a hyper-awareness of race and advantage, and of racism and white supremacy. As a comment on the 21-day Racial Equity Challenge Google Jamboard expresses, for "*BIPOC staff it can be painful and draining to constantly be asked to 'take the stage.' The work may or may not [be] valued and may or may not 'count' towards their 'real' work.*" As we move forward, we must ask ourselves: how will we center BIPOC employees in our anti-racism work and conversations, and how would this re-

centering look for our organization? Centering whiteness over BIPOC voices is a continuation of the white supremacy culture we actively seek to disrupt. Or as Ijeoma Uluo writes, "If your anti-racism work prioritizes the 'growth' and 'enlightenment' of white America over the safety, dignity, and humanity of people of color – it's not anti-racism work. It's white supremacy" (2019).

On accountability

One of our 21-day Racial Equity Challenge Google Jamboards encouraged participants to reflect on accountability and posed Mia Mingus's central question: "what if accountability wasn't scary? It will never be easy or comfortable, but what if it wasn't scary? What if our own accountability wasn't something we ran from, but something we ran towards and desired, appreciated, held as sacred?" (Mingus, 2019). This proved to be a challenging question for participants, but those willing to engage responded with thought and care. Some stand out comments included, "*[to] hold each other in community - to work with others in solidarity and vulnerability to make real change"* and "*I'd feel safer at work and secure in my employment if those that caused or perpetuated harm held themselves accountable in some way."*

McKensie Mack encourages us to allow space for a generous accountability within the profession: "we use the term *generous accountability* to capture all of us who have internalized the idea that accountability is punitive, shaming, hateful, damaging. It's none of [those] things"; indeed, true "accountability is preventing, intervening in, responding to, and healing from harm" (Mack, 2020; emphasis our own). We are all capable of harming others and have a choice to either amplify that harm or reduce it. Healing, then, is necessary, especially for our

BIPOC colleagues in libraries and archives. Perhaps generous accountability, from all in the profession, can get us there, as Mack implores:

> We need generous accountability from white librarians and white administrators. We need generous accountability from NBPOC [non-Black People of Color] who are librarians and leaders in librarianship. We need generous accountability from Black librarians and leaders in librarianship. We need you to be accountable for your healing (2020).

Without accountability, honesty, and openness, real change cannot be achieved. Some (mainly white) people perhaps fear making mistakes, while BIPOC folks can become silenced due to fear of retaliation for speaking up. Our hope is that the practice of generous accountability might help assuage some of these fears. The question remains as to whom the IDEA Council is accountable, and how this accountability might bring about change within the libraries. It might be as one Challenge participant shares, "*Accountability is action… It's healing and change."*

On action and measuring change

As we move toward a conclusion, we return to the simple question of *what is action?* For the IDEA Council and the University Libraries, action is providing space for critical learning and development, intervening in racist library systems with equity-focused action plans, funding staff-led projects that advance social justice in the organization, and marking whiteness and white supremacy within our collections, policies, and library culture. Action can involve either small or big steps. Action can build anti-racist and equitable systems. Action can change hearts and minds. Action can activate in-depth and critical participation among library staff.

As we look toward measuring the comprehensive changes our organization has made, we must be careful not to rely solely on the number of willing participants who engage in our actions or on the number of BIPOC employees at our libraries. Such thinking would uphold the notion of diversity as a business case—or, as Subramanian shares, "we cannot be truly anti-racist if we limit ourselves, knowingly forgo important knowledge and insight, and ultimately hide behind numbers that may not fully support the experiences and realities of our communities" (2020). How are BIPOC library employees and library users experiencing our spaces? Do they feel welcomed, supported, and valued?

Our work is iterative, and assessment is crucial to moving forward. We are still considering how the staff surveys conducted over the past year might connect with future IDEA Council and Reckoning-related initiatives. For instance, the baseline racial equity survey led by Dr. Allison De Marco offered several concrete actionable suggestions, some of which we incorporated into our strategies. These include the ability to submit substantive critiques of the library in more anonymous ways, ending library fines, organizing affinity group caucusing, providing REI Phase I registration funding for those interested, and allocating the time and space to share with library colleagues about the anti-racism work happening within departments and on teams.

Additionally, from the book discussion surveys we learned more about how staff would like to engage and participate in future conversations about racial equity and libraries, including small group discussions, department-led conversations, and affinity group caucusing. As a result, these specific engagement options were offered during the 21-Day Racial Equity Challenge. We also observed some of the connections staff made between reading *How to Be*

An Antiracist and their work in the libraries. Several participants acknowledged the need to continue their own learning and awareness, while also appreciating that anti-racism work is active, ongoing, and without a clear end.

Toward a conclusion

In an open letter to the UNC-Chapel Hill community, Student Body President and Board of Trustees member Lamar Gregory Richards writes,

> "The sincerest thing I can share with each of you is that Carolina is not prepared. Carolina is not prepared for the "reckoning" of which it continues to speak and it is certainly not prepared to face the reality of having to undo the entire system upon which it was built—and rebuild" (Richards, 2021).

Richards's poignant reminder is a sobering backdrop to the anti-racism work (or lack thereof) happening within our institution. The campus climate cannot be ignored, and the libraries do not operate within a vacuum. So again, we ask: what does it mean for the University Libraries, with the guidance of the IDEA Council, to attempt to do the work of reckoning—of accounting for our past, disrupting oppressive systems, and rebuilding anew—at a university that is constantly failing to do the same? Can we be an anti-racist library at a racist and actively unwelcoming institution? Although we have made critical progress over the past few years, as documented in this article, the realization of this goal remains to be seen.

During each book discussion, library-wide conversation, and caucus meeting we have reiterated that *everyone* must work every day to create an anti-racist library, and we continually push against the notion of easy answers and solutions. Library conversation guidelines, moreover, warned against expecting closure, because this work is a never-ending

process. As Hurley *et al.* explains, "practicing cultural humility is an ongoing effort, not a skill set to be acquired or knowledge to be mastered" (p. 549). Although the words "cultural humility" may not have been used explicitly during our library-wide conversations, the practice was expressed at every turn.

One assertion we can make with confidence is that white people need to do the work of reckoning and anti-racism. Far too often, BIPOC voices are singled out and tokenized but remain unheard. Brown, Cline, and Méndez-Brady (2021) share their lived labor experiences, detailing instances of "serving on search committee after search committee as the token representative of their race" and being "placed on an institutional diversity committee almost immediately after starting a new position, without ever being formally asked" (p. 105). University Libraries staff responding to yet another Google Jamboard question during the 21-day Racial Equity Challenge about who is leaned on to undertake anti-racism work in libraries and archives noted this very thing: "*The same few BIPOC employees who are on the staff, asked to be token representatives over and over again*" and *"BIPOC folks have a mental and emotional burden when asked to [do] this work that can't be easily explained and it can't be cast off*." During the same reflection session, moreover, staff (mostly white) acknowledged the need for *"white folks (me included) initiating and taking on labor"* and for anti-racism work to be seen as *"everyone's job, built into their work, [and] not an optional [activity]*."

We know that the work of equity, inclusion, and anti-racism is continuous; it is, as the cliché goes, a marathon not a sprint. As the IDEA Council presses forward in facilitating conversation and encouraging direct action, we do so with humility and with recognition of the identities we bring to this work (Hurley *et al*., 2019). We do this work collectively because we

know as BIPOC and white colleagues, our solidarity and liberation are bound together. To quote Evans *et al*., "Our way forward to dismantling, disrupting, healing, and liberating depends on excavating the roots of anti-Blackness together" (2020). We hope our exploration of our efforts to develop an anti-racist library inspires others in the library and archival community to take up questions of action and change, centering and accountability, and reckoning within their own organizations.

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Appendix A

Sample 21-day Racial Equity blog posts

Day 7: Whiteness in Collections and Libraries

As we've read and encountered, whiteness is often left unmarked within our systems, be it social, economic, educational, health, or otherwise. Libraries are no different. Today's topic encourages us to grapple with the invisibility of whiteness within our library-focused systems: collections, description, conservation, spaces, and more. As you engage with the resources below, reflect on where and how whiteness remains invisible to you and to the work you do.

[#library-wide] [#collection_development] Read "Whiteness as Collections," a blog post by Sofia Leung
[#library-wide] [#HR] Read "White Librarianship in Blackface," by April Hathcock and "Soliciting performance, hiding bias: Whiteness and librarianship," by A. Galvan
[#collection_development] [#tech_services] Read "Remembering the Howard University Librarian Who Decolonized the Way Books Were Catalogued"
[#special_collections] [#preservation] Read "Thoughts on Conserving Racist Materials in Libraries," by Michelle C. Smith
[#tech_services] Read M. Adler's article "Classification along the color line: Excavating racism in the stacks"
[#scholarly_communications] Read Brenna McLaughlin's guest post "Reckoning with Whiteness in Scholarly Publishing"
[#library-wide] [#RIS] Listen to a podcast episode with Peggy McIntosh and Debby Irving on the importance of making whiteness visible in our teaching and learning spaces (about 52 minutes)
[#library-wide] Watch the author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's talk, "The danger of a single story" (about 19 minutes)
[#library-wide] Engage with statistics on employee demographics in librarianship
[#library-wide] Connect with your library colleagues at an IDEA Action ideation session (April 13 at 3:00pm)

Day 15: BIPOC Labor

While building an anti-racist library (and society) is everyone's responsibility, BIPOC colleagues are continually asked to provide more time, energy, and emotional labor than white colleagues. BIPOC folks did not create society's structures of racism and white supremacy, but they are continually asked to be the ones who fight it. Think -- who is tasked with serving on committee after committee? We must build a future that centers BIPOC voices without demanding increased labor.

[#library-wide] [#HR] Read Tarida Anantachai and Camille Chesley's chapter "The burden of care: Cultural taxation of women of color librarians on the tenure-track,"in *Pushing the margins: Women of color and intersectionality in LIS*, Rose L. Chou and Annie Pho, editors
[#library-wide] Read "Leaning on our labor: Whiteness and hierarchies of power in LIS work," in *Knowledge Justice: Disrupting Library and Information Studies through Critical Race Theory*, Sofia Y. Leung and Jorge R. Lopez-McKnight, editors
[#library-wide] Listen to an episode of your choice from the LibVoices podcast, which features librarians of color. (approximately 35 minutes each; note: no transcripts available) or watch Anti-Racism Work and Women in Librarianship, presented by Loida Garcia-Febo, Twanna Hodge, Dr. Nicole Cooke, Tasha Nins, and Shauntee Burns-Simpson (about 1.5 hours)
[#special_collections] Watch Dorothy Berry's Keynote Address for the 2020 SNCA Annual Meeting, Imagining Better Futures for Archival Labor (21:54)
[#library-wide] Engage with Isabel Espinal's Open Shelf interview on whiteness, inclusive librarianship, and emotional labor
[#library-wide] Reflect on April Hathcock's blog post "Your Learning Hurts," from *At the Intersection*
[#special_collections] Read S. William's blog post Implications of Archival Labor
[#library-wide] Notice labor inequities around anti-racism work in libraries and archives. You might consider asking yourself:

- Who is leaned on to undertake anti-racism work in these spaces?
- How is anti-racism work valued in these spaces?
- What would equitable labor expectations for anti-racism work look like?