



## Counterspace Support for BIPOC Employees Within a Holistic JEDI Library Framework

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# Chapter 1

## Counterspace Support for BIPOC Employees Within a Holistic JEDI Library Framework

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter presents a case study of how an academic library supports Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) employees with funding so these workers can find counterspaces (spaces where they can feel safe in community with other BIPOC who are navigating similar struggles while working in a predominantly white institution). Through its Inclusion, Diversity, Anti-Racism and Equity (IDARE) Committee, the University of Massachusetts (UMass) Amherst Libraries worked to establish a fund for meeting some of the cultural and racial equity needs of library employees who are BIPOC. With a new Woman of Color Dean, the fund transformed into a funding priority and criterion that puts the needs of BIPOC employees at the center, while asking everyone in the library to undertake JEDI work and view all of their work through a JEDI lens. This chapter discusses the “Why” and the “How” of this JEDI initiative, placing it in the context of a larger holistic vision for inclusive librarianship outlined by current and former BIPOC employees and the JEDI vision of the Dean and her leadership team.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In this chapter we present a case study of how an academic library supports Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) employees with funding so that these workers can find counterspaces (spaces where they can feel safe in community with other BIPOC who are navigating similar struggles while working in a predominantly white institution). Through its Inclusion, Diversity, Anti-Racism, and Equity (IDARE) Committee, the University of Massachusetts (UMass) Amherst Libraries worked to establish a fund for meeting some of the cultural and racial equity needs of library employees who are BIPOC. With a new woman of color dean, the fund transformed into a funding priority and criterion that put the needs of BIPOC employees at the center, while asking everyone in the library to undertake justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI) work and view all of their work through a JEDI lens. We discuss the why and the how of this JEDI initiative, placing it in the context of a larger holistic vision for inclusive librarianship outlined by current and former BIPOC employees and the JEDI vision of the dean and her leadership team.

## **THE WHAT**

Libraries can heed the call for racial healing by making funding clearly and easily available to racially marginalized and underrepresented workers to find counterspaces: community where they would not feel so culturally and racially isolated. Here we outline why and how we did this at our university library.

## **THE WHY**

### **Racial Inequities Experienced by BIPOC Who Work in Academic Libraries**

Academic libraries in the United States are strikingly white enterprises. Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) employees who work in spaces dominated by white people are exposed to a generalized culture that doesn't see or understand their lived experiences. "Diversity" is valued in documents, but often not in practice. The very term BIPOC encompasses a wide range of identities, histories, perspectives and everyday experiences, but in the context of most library workplaces, they all become "the other" against which the unspoken invisible norms of whiteness are always pressing. White supremacist culture encourages assimilation and conformity. Although these terms often seem abstract and analytical, they affect everyone who works in libraries. White people in this culture have trouble observing, understanding, and absorbing the experiences of BIPOC. In academic libraries, BIPOC are not encouraged to talk about and share their experiences when they make white people uncomfortable. The Library and Information Studies (LIS) literature includes many examples of BIPOC library workers speaking to the deleterious effects of working in a predominantly white space and their need to find BIPOC professional community (Blas et al., 2019, 2021; Brown et al., 2018; Echavarría & Wertheimer, 1997; Fiedler & Sterling, 2021; Garnar, 2021; Hodge & Williams, 2021; Oates, 2022; Shearer & Chiewphasa, 2021; Swanson et al., 2018). In her chapter in the book, *Dismantling Constructs of Whiteness in Higher Education*, librarian Evangela Q. Oates stated, "As part of the higher educational enterprise, Black administrators, faculty,

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and staff may spend one-third or more of their days in spaces that are foundationally oppositional to their worldviews, epistemologies, status as free people, and authority” (Oates, 2022, p. 173).

While some white people in academic libraries are recognizing their whiteness and are trying to figure out how to change the racial demographics of the people who work in libraries, efforts and policies that *effectively* create change too often continue to be largely the work of the very few BIPOC who currently work in libraries. Unfortunately, this work is done within systems of oppression in which *institutional* diversity, equity, and inclusion programs often do more harm than good to BIPOC in the field (Gabiola, 2018). Susan VanDeventer Iverson concluded 16 years ago that “diversity policies reproduce whiteness by centering dominant discourses while simultaneously failing to name whiteness as a barrier to inclusion ... positioning white people as the primary beneficiaries of diversity initiatives that purportedly support marginalized staff” (Brown et al., 2021, pp. 98–99). When diversity initiatives and values are stated as being good for the organization, or “good for business,” but not necessarily good for BIPOC, these diversity efforts backfire and have detrimental effects for BIPOC people’s sense of belonging and even their interest in joining these organizations (Georgeac & Rattan, 2023). Brown, et al. (2021) argued that “diversity work can mask discriminatory practices and even become discriminatory itself, especially considering the absence of CRT strategies ..., such as creating counterspaces for BIPOC and fostering community building” (p. 101).

These outcomes create burnout in people who are already isolated. Oates (2022) asked, “How does one teach, advise, motivate, write, conduct research and serve on committees when their daily realities are not represented in the spaces, curriculum, leadership, pedagogical approaches, and values at their institutions?” (p. 175). To achieve equity, there is a necessity for institutions to pay attention to the needs of BIPOC workers and to allocate appropriate resources to meeting those needs. Jones et al. (2022) stated,

*After hundreds of years of prioritizing white voices and interests in collections and programming decisions, it is only natural that library funding be specifically devoted to expanding and facilitating work toward closing the equity gap and dismantling racist systems and structures (p. 96).*

## **The Racial Climate at University of Massachusetts Amherst**

The racial climate at the institution where we work, the University of Massachusetts, Amherst (UMass Amherst), is fraught with well-intentioned statements of solidarity, pervasive anti-Black bias, and persistent discrimination against marginalized (i.e., nondominant/majority groups [any group that does not identify as white and/or cisgender and/or able bodied]). The aspirational anti-racist action plans and commitments that the university espouses often fail to truly protect, uphold the dignity of, and preserve the authentic self of BIPOC students, faculty, and staff.

The UMass Amherst Campus Climate Survey results, pooled from respondents in November 2021, featured a 41.6% response rate and illustrated the tense racial campus climate landscape. The four main categories of the Campus Climate Survey were Classroom Climate for Students and Instructors, Perceptions of the Campus Climate, Feelings of Connection and Friendship, and Sense of Belonging (Office of Academic Planning and Assessment, 2022). Communities were formed, solidified, and sustained through a felt sense of belonging; so that is the metric we will share.

Among BIPOC undergraduate students, graduate students, faculty, and staff there was a high percentage of No Sense of Belonging reported (Office of Academic Planning and Assessment, 2022). To break down the statistics further, 26% of Black undergraduates, 18% of Black graduate students, 14%

of Black staff, and 14% of Black faculty felt they have No Sense of Belonging. The numbers were similar for Latinx/Latiné undergraduate students at 17%, while 27% of graduate students, 18% of staff, and 15% of faculty report feeling No Sense of Belonging. The results look bleak, but in our experience, the emotional reality of life for BIPOC community members on our campus is even bleaker than these results show because the blandness of these numbers cannot accurately capture the trauma, grief, and pain of ongoing racial injustices.

## **Need to Support Counterspaces in Library Institutions**

Libraries as institutions must persist in prioritizing tangible, creative, and innovative ways to bring vitality to statements of solidarity, aspirational action plans, and anti-racist commitments. One way is by providing the financial means for BIPOC to find counterspaces in this very white field. The concept of counterspaces has been prevalent in the field of education, sociology, and psychology for some time, but is not much discussed in the library and information studies field. Keels (2019) defined counterspaces as “safe spaces that simultaneously validate and critique one’s interconnected self and group identity” (p.2) and as “critical spaces where marginalized students challenge each other to push beyond stereotypical narratives, develop counterstories, and learn adapting strategies from others who are navigating similar struggles” (p. 161). Keels cautioned against a “college for all” narrative that brings BIPOC students onto campus, but does not attend to the specific needs and experiences of BIPOC students (pp. 1-2).

Counterspaces for BIPOC library workers are spaces where these workers can find some relief and build community with other BIPOC, a space where there is a sense of belonging from having a shared racial and cultural experience. Librarians Jennifer Brown and her colleagues discussed the need for BIPOC counterspace in LIS as the reason that they formed the group *We Here* in 2016: “Counterspaces are invaluable peer mentorship resources because so many of the issues we face are dangerous to express in predominantly white spaces. Fear of discrimination, being further marginalized, or being passed over for promotions silences those at the margins” (Brown et al., 2018, p. 176). They also referred to the following quote from April Hathcock, who wrote,

*... . We need exclusive spaces where we can curse our lot, speak our minds, and then dry our faces and take back up our fighting stances. We need places where we can be weak and vulnerable without being in danger or exposed (Brown et al., 2018, p. 176).*

## **The Rationale: What Motivated Us to Make a Counterspace Funding Proposal**

### **Motivated by Our Positionalities**

Education researcher H. Richard Milner (2007) cautioned that “when researchers are not mindful of the enormous role of their own and others’ racialized positionality and cultural ways of knowing, the results can be dangerous to communities and individuals of color” (p. 388). Those of us who advocated and succeeded in securing library administrative commitment for BIPOC counterspace support came to this work with different racial, gender, cultural, and class experiences, knowledge, and motivations. This was neither a BIPOC-only effort, nor a paternalistic effort on the part of white staff or administrators.

*Isabel Espinal*

I am a light-skinned Latina, a Dominican American librarian. I am not only a first-generation college graduate but also a first-generation high school graduate. I started in this field in public libraries in 1991 and have been in the same academic library since 1998. Black, Indigenous, People of Color spaces in librarianship have been important to me from day one—actually since before I became a librarian—because I learned about REFORMA (The National Association to Promote Library and Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish Speaking) and the Black Caucus of ALA while researching library schools and libraries as a career choice. I might not have become a librarian had it not been for these organizations. I was lucky to have lived in places (the California Bay Area and the New York Metro area) while in library school and after becoming a librarian where I could attend local REFORMA meetings. The REFORMA meetings were spaces where I felt not just included, but also respected, celebrated, and treasured. I felt like I was part of a bigger mission and movement of people who were often very different from each other in many ways, but who had an expansive and inclusive vision of library and information services that included my communities. It was a space that was both comfortable and cutting edge, generative and restorative; a place where people valued me and where I felt I could be myself.

After arriving at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, I was lucky to have professional development funds and grants that I could apply for to attend national meetings of these groups and to attend the Joint Conference of Librarians of Color. But every time I did so, I felt that I had to sacrifice going to mainstream conferences, such as ACRL (Association of College and Research Libraries) or going to conferences in my subject or collecting areas, such as the Seminar for the Acquisition of Latin American Materials or the Latin American Studies Association or the Association for the Study of African American Life and History. To this day I have yet to attend an ACRL conference. Given the choice of BIPOC spaces or a mainstream conference space, I would choose the BIPOC space because I hunger for the community of other librarians of color. I felt starved at my place of work in regard to this community. In thinking and writing about the pervasiveness of whiteness in our profession, the inequity of this situation hit me hard. So I decided to speak to it by making this proposal in the article I cowrote with Tonia Sutherland and Charlotte Roh (Espinal et al., 2018), and to go further and actually propose this at my library.

*Anne Graham*

I came to libraries from a science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) field and identify as a white, cisgender woman. My college major was geology. My first job after college had the title mud logger. It involved creating a log of the geologic units being drilled through by oil company drilling rigs. To do this work, I needed reports on the geology of the areas I was covering in the western region of the United States. I found these reports in university libraries, with the help of librarians who knew about the information I needed and led me to it. Later, I lived in Virginia and worked for a consulting engineering firm. Again, I needed geologic information in the form of United States Geological Survey reports on the areas where I was working. I found them in the Geology Library at Virginia Tech. The librarian there knew what I was looking for and let me explore the collection. She was fielding questions from other people, leading them to information. That was where I started to think about becoming a librarian.

I am now a STEM librarian at a large university. I came to libraries as a white person and discovered that I was in the dominant racial group, the dominant gender group, and the dominant physical ability group. I was drawn into attempting to change the detrimental effects of my positionality while realizing

that I grew up in a culture that had always nurtured me, but not people of color, not people with different abilities. Breonna Taylor's and George Floyd's murders brought me out of that position of comfort to the reality that everything I had been taught was coming from a culture of white supremacy. At a protest on our town common when a senior in high school spoke about her experience as a young Black woman, she asked the people gathered around her to change the curriculum. I want to do that and to change the culture we live in.

*Maria Rios*

I was born and raised in the southeastern United States and identify as a Black/Puerto Rican, queer, nonbinary woman with higher education (master's degree) privilege.

Libraries, as physical space, have always *personally* invoked a sense of joy, freedom, and community.

At the start of my sophomore year in college, I was a full-time student while also working at my local public library. One day a patron asked me for book recommendations, and unbeknownst to me, I did my first reader's advisory. The experience resonated with me so much that I shifted my entire undergraduate career toward librarianship. I sought out and secured an unpaid internship at my university library; this position blossomed into a student peer research assistant position the next semester and served as source material for both my honor's project and final project. Eager to join the field, I immediately went to graduate school following my graduation in December 2015.

During graduate school, I maintained a full-time courseload and two part-time positions at the same time—library specialist at a small technical college and graduate assistantship within my Master's in Library Science (MLIS) program's department. A newly minted MLIS holder in December 2017, I immediately began seeking full-time employment. My search ended in 2018 when I secured a position at a large land grant university in the northeastern United States.

The student community is diverse, but unfortunately, I find myself as the sole Black librarian within my department. For scope and scale purposes, my library employs between 150 and 160 full-time library workers at any point in time—and I am one of potentially five self-identified Black staff. Imagine my surprise when I found that working as a professional librarian was especially isolating as a Black/Puerto Rican individual. My journey to professional librarianship has been resourced largely through scholarships, grants, and programs aimed at supporting librarians from marginalized populations. I am incredibly grateful that now, as a professional librarian, I have access to institutional resources like professional development funds. These resources are essential for me to maintain community within Black, Indigenous, POC library spaces.

*Kate Freedman*

I am queer, nonbinary, and white. I come from a lower-middle-class background and was also the only person in my immediate family to earn a college degree or go to graduate school. I earned both my master's degree in library and information studies (2007) and my doctorate in history (2018). The aspects of my identity that are marginalized within the higher education sphere have increased my sensitivity to the engines of inequality and oppression within American society. They also drew me to researching the history of white supremacy in my graduate studies in history. My doctoral research illuminated the ways that a social-justice-oriented white-majority religious group, the Quakers, went against the seemingly egalitarian spirit of their religious doctrines to profit from the institution of slavery in the 17th and 18th centuries; my research also showed me how right thought alone does not translate into right

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action, especially within the profit driven economic system in which we still exist (Freedman, 2018). I am now a history librarian at a large public research university. I joined my current library in 2013, and my extensive research on the history of the economic and cultural systems that have enabled white supremacy led me early in my career to join informally with BIPOC and white-ally colleagues to discuss ways that we could improve justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion within the libraries. In 2017, I was a founding member of the Libraries' Inclusion, Diversity, Anti-Racism, and Equity (IDARE) Committee, and I have worked with members of this committee on a number of projects and proposals that will be discussed further on in this article.

### **Motivated by a Documented Need for BIPOC Library Counterspaces**

Our library is not unique, and neither are libraries, as a professional space in which whiteness and white supremacy cultural norms dominate. Numerous studies indicate that BIPOC in predominantly white workplaces have to perform many hidden and often unconscious maneuvers in order to maintain or succeed in these environments, what Wingfield and Alston (2014) term “racial tasks”: modifying their self-presentation, conducting emotion work, and smoothing interactions with white peers. Additionally, “workers of color are assigned positions and tasks which reinforce that racial status quo” (Wingfield & Alston, 2014, p. 274). Okun’s (n.d.) widely circulated list of characteristics of white supremacy culture that show up in organizations has resonated with BIPOC in many fields, including nonprofit institutions dedicated to social justice. Many organizational leaders say they “want to be multicultural,” but “actually only allow other people and cultures to come in if they adapt or conform to already existing cultural norms” (Okun, n.d.). In her book *Community as Rebellion: A Syllabus for Surviving Academia as a Woman of Color*, Latinx Studies scholar Lorgia García-Peña discussed the phenomenon of tokenism within traditional organizational diversity and inclusion frameworks (García Peña, 2022). Using the term “The One,” García-Peña (2022) pointed out its pervasiveness not only in academia, but across many professions and industries, resulting in BIPOC employees feeling at odds with their coworkers on a daily basis often for the most basic cultural practices. She told the story of a white male colleague’s response to her expressiveness and comfort in greeting another woman of color in the workplace:

*He was clearly made uncomfortable by our expressions of affection. I am by nature a warm person. I express care to people. The comment took me by surprise, as it made me realize how much of who I am and how I move in the world is unacceptable within these spaces of whiteness (García Peña, 2022, p. 16).*

García-Peña urges women of color in academia and beyond to make community with each other to not only survive but to thrive.

Using similar language, BIPOC librarians have also written about this experience of isolation and need for community with other BIPOC. For example, Fiedler and Sterling (2021) wrote that “sometimes it feels like we exist in a different professional world from our counterparts” (p. 82). Jennifer Brown, Jennifer A. Ferretti, Sofia Leung, and Marisa Méndez-Brady testified about their experiences in library workplaces and mainstream library conferences, such as ALA: “We feel isolated and lonely when we realize we are the ‘only’ person of color in all of the rooms that comprise these events, no matter how big those rooms are” (p. 169). Teresa Neely (2018) reported that after nearly 25 years in academic libraries, she had “never worked at an institution where there was another credentialed Black librarian, female or otherwise, on the faculty.” Neely (2018) added the following comment:



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*Most days, it is a real struggle to just get out of bed in the morning, knowing that a hostile workplace is waiting for you to arrive. A workplace that is hostile because you are the only Black faculty librarian who ever worked here, and your colleagues have no idea what it is like to be you.*

An anonymous respondent in a study of “the lived experience of academic librarians of color” reported: “I feel more disconnected from my cultural heritage because of the homogenous community and lack of diversity in my institution and profession. I have debated leaving the profession because of how isolated [I feel] from other minority members” (Swanson et al., 2018, p. 884). Janis J. Shearer and Ben B. Chiewphasa (2021) stated that “being on the defensive role has been exhausting, and being in an environment where pushback is welcome is liberating: We’ve been excluded for decades.” also asked, “Can we have something for ourselves for once?” They wrote of their yearning for:

*a space where BIPOC librarians learn from one another, which is not possible, when ‘you’re the only one.’ Library workers in academia oftentimes embrace collective knowledge organization and building to navigate around new and accurate information. For BIPOC librarians, collective knowledge mechanisms also provide invaluable spaces that help negate or challenge epistemic supremacy.*

Similarly, Fiedler and Sterling (2021) extolled the virtues of the Joint Conference of Librarians of Color (JCLC) for building community:

*Although these conferences are open to all races and ethnicities, our experience at JCLC was that the majority of attendees were librarians of color. In a field that is 88% white, it is a rare opportunity to not be a minority in a professional space” (p. 83)*

Fiedler and Sterling (2021) also analyzed the offerings of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) national conference vis-a-vis JCLC and found that JCLC was more attuned to the holistic needs of BIPOC library workers: Among their findings, they noted that “the JCLC conferences cultivated the entire career path of librarians of color while ACRL focused mostly on recruitment of those same librarians” (p. 83).

This clearly is a justice and equity issue because BIPOC library workers aren’t getting something that is routine for white library workers. Fiedler and Sterling (2021), to this point, noted that “attending a conference like JCLC, the People of Color in Library and Information Science Summit, or any national or regional event hosted by an ALA ethnic caucus is an opportunity for librarians of color to experience what white librarians experience every day: what it’s like to be a part of the majority” (p. 89). Fiedler and Sterling (2021) further suggested that if “libraries want to recruit, retain, and support librarians of color, they should also provide financial opportunities for them to attend conferences where they will not be in the minority” (p. 88).

In a talk to the UMass Community, Dr. Micere Keels, Associate Professor in Comparative Human Development at the University of Chicago, promoted asking our institutions to move beyond tolerance and toward full inclusion. She talked about the creation of counterspaces, where people of color can feel safe in community with each other on a historically white campus. She stated in her book, *Campus Counterspaces: Black and Latinx Students’ Search for Community at Historically White Universities*, “Institutions that recognize that historical marginalization is often sustained by present-day disenfranchisement, discrimination, and stereotyping would more likely provide resources and opportunities to

create and normalize formal and informal counterspaces” (Keels, 2019, p.152). These ideas fueled the existing desire to build structural identity-conscious support for our BIPOC coworkers in the form of a fund to enable access to counterspaces in a primarily white workspace. The provision of professional development funding was an effort to support BIPOC library employees with the financial means to seek BIPOC spaces within the national and international libraries community. The shared language of counterspaces on our campus that we gained from Dr. Keels’ visit helped us make the case to our library colleagues and administration at the time.

## **THE HOW**

### **Building a Proposal and Seeking Buy-In From a Predominantly White Staff and Administration**

Getting a commitment from the library administration for funding BIPOC counterspace and conference support took many conversations, explanations, and presentations over a period of years with significant administrator turnover (2018–2021). From seeding the idea with the Libraries’ Diversity and Inclusion committee in 2018, (which later became the Inclusion, Diversity, Anti-Racism and Equity (IDARE) committee), to sharing it in a library-wide sociocracy training session (Rau & Koch-Gonzalez, 2018; Sociocracy for All, 2023), to facilitating conversations with the Librarians Council (a standing committee of approximately 40 library workers who are members in the faculty/librarian union on campus), with the Libraries’ Staff Council (a standing council of non-librarian library workers) and with individual BIPOC library workers, to discussions with administrators, to bringing a proposal forward to the library administration, the path to this initiative was long and winding.

An important component was the formation of an anti-racism “helping circle” of four people within the Librarians Council who urged the library administration at the time to create an action plan that would back up the Libraries’ anti-racism statement made in summer 2020, a time when libraries joined many organizations and corporations across the United States that made public anti-racism statements (Gibson et al., 2021; Mehra, 2021). A BIPOC support fund thus was presented as one part of a greater anti-racism plan for the libraries. The Librarians Council’s anti-racism helping circle decided to work on moving the idea forward by proposing the creation of a task force within the council to work on implementing this particular anti-racism effort. The Librarians Council endorsed the task force with the charge to research vital steps in the creation of a BIPOC professional racial support fund for current BIPOC employees and those we hope to welcome to our Libraries community in the future. After several meetings and discussions with various coworkers in the libraries, the task force reported the following findings and implementation recommendations to the Librarians Council:

- Form a BIPOC support working group within IDARE, the committee that is open to all library workers.
- Write a proposal to the interim dean of libraries.
- Work with the dean of libraries to find funding from our current funds (or find other possible funding partners) to determine how to create a perpetual fund within the UMass Amherst Libraries
- Determine who will vet requests for funding, streamlining the process as much as possible.
- Recommend how to move finances in and out of the fund.

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The Librarians Council endorsed these recommendations, and the IDARE committee took up work and endorsed them. IDARE asserted that this would be a good recruitment and retention tool for employees at all levels. It would show future BIPOC employees that there is a support mechanism for those seeking counterspaces in their library work.

In addition, current BIPOC employees volunteered feedback that they welcomed funding support. They suggested that any fund not be made difficult for BIPOC employees to utilize, that the process be streamlined, and that BIPOC could request funds in a timely manner, and that student workers be included.

The final proposal to the dean of libraries included these subjects:

- The purpose of BIPOC support funding and why it is necessary across the entire library organization.
- Support is for library BIPOC employees across the entire organization.
- Proposed budgeted amount of \$10,000 to be provided.
- Eligibility and application procedure
- Description of what funding would be used for
- Who could oversee the fund?

Through discussions in IDARE, the BIPOC support working group was able to meet with and gain valuable procedural knowledge from a group of coworkers who oversee a separate endowed fund to support professional development for nonlibrarian workers. These two groups met to learn how to create a working model for the implementation of the proposed funding. This meeting assisted in the generation of an application form and other elements that would be necessary to include such as:

- Guidelines for our colleagues to consider and to communicate the idea of professional development funding for counterspaces
- Content to share the idea on a public-facing web page was created to communicate with future employees the nature of our commitment to supporting their needs.
- A rubric for determining how to distribute professional development funding in a just, equitable way.
- An application form was created as part of the method for easily vetting applications while informing supervisors.
- A subgroup of employees from the IDARE group was solicited to oversee this process, and the Director of Diversity, Inclusion, and Human Resources was asked to be on this subgroup.

### **The Importance of Messaging and One-on-One BIPOC Outreach and Conversations**

Although many BIPOC library workers, especially BIPOC librarians, are familiar with spaces such as JCLC and the People of Color in Library & Information Science (POCinLIS) Summit, many are not, as has been the case at UMass Amherst. Additionally, it was apparent that more communication would be needed to ensure people were aware of opportunities such as JCLC and that when opportunities arise, clear descriptions and easy access to registration links and associated forms would be needed. Supervisors encouraging one-on-one conversations and email exchanges with BIPOC employees encouraging them to make use of funding would be necessary. Going into the future, our expectation is that all people

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in the library would continue to communicate similar opportunities, such as the REFORMA National conference, the National Conference of African American Librarians, Racial Equity Institute, and the POC in LIS Summit, amongst others.

### **From a “Fund” to a Funding Priority and Criterion for Engagement**

In the summer of 2022, the University hired a new dean, Nandita Mani, whose commitment to justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion) is front and center. The dean will continue to support funding for BIPOC library workers and has instituted a library-wide funding request process in support of JEDI initiatives. Under Dean Mani, JEDI at UMass Amherst Libraries will take a holistic approach that will encourage all Libraries employees to pursue professional development, engage in JEDI project work, cultivate JEDI engagement activities, support JEDI collections, and encourage BIPOC employees to apply for funding that will support their need for counterspaces outside of the libraries, where they are currently unavailable.

### **WHAT THIS APPROACH IS AND ISN'T**

#### **Not Asking BIPOC to Do the Work of JEDI**

A common misunderstanding in JEDI initiatives that focus on BIPOC workers is that the initiative is asking BIPOC to do the work of JEDI (Brown et al., 2018, 2021). For example, many library diversity residents are hired to add diversity to a library, but an assumption is made that they will also be on diversity or JEDI or diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) committees and that they will do de facto outreach to communities of color, regardless of their job title and duties. When we proposed the BIPOC support fund, we encountered a similar misunderstanding among some library employees and administrators. A BIPOC support fund would be the opposite of asking BIPOC to do the work of JEDI; rather, it is asking the institution to support BIPOC by funding their ability to tap into BIPOC library worker counterspaces.

#### **Part of a Holistic Approach, Not a “One and Done”**

Keels (2019) cautioned that “counterpaces are not a panacea” for Black and Latinx students’ sense of belonging and academic success, and noted that substantial financial assistance to attain a higher education degree is key for many of these students (p. 164). The BIPOC support fund is also not enough on its own to do all the anti-racism work of the library; it is not a “one and done.” It is but one very important piece of a greater holistic vision that Isabel Espinal, Tonia Sutherland, and Charlotte Roh (2018) proposed, some of which the UMass IDARE Committee embraced in their strategic planning and has been building on.

#### **Suggestions in “A Holistic Approach to Inclusive Librarianship”**

Espinal, Sutherland and Roh’s (2018) comprehensive holistic approach includes these elements:

- Creating positions that do not require the MLS and that would pay BIPOC employees to obtain the MLS on the job, thus increasing the numbers of BIPOC with MLS degrees.

### ***Counterspace Support of BIPOC Employees in a JEDI Library Framework***

- Allocating funding for librarians of color to attend conferences of librarians of color.
- Launching an education program for all levels of library employees and managers that would include promoting and advancing the understanding of whiteness in society generally and librarianship specifically.
- Implementing programs for the BIPOC veterans of the racial battles of whiteness in libraries, who have endured years of microaggressions.
- Combining technological and “cutting-edge” librarianship with diversity librarianship, such as open access projects and digital/data curation roles and media/digital literacy efforts
- Infusing more flexibility, agility, risk-taking, and commitment to BIPOC representation and leadership in library hiring practices
- Moving from microaggressions to microaffections in interpersonal library relationships

Since Espinal et al.’s (2018) work was published, Espinal initiated the task of fleshing out some of these ideas and trying to actually put them into practice at her library. She took the first idea to the UMass Amherst Diversity group before it had formed into a committee, and with coworkers Laura Quilter, Pete Smith, Sarah Hutton, and Kate Freedman, developed a proposal for establishing a post-baccalaureate fellowship program to bring BIPOC into librarianship. With Maria Rios and April Hatchcock, this proposal was explained within a Critical Race Theory framework as a way to address the racial wealth gap (Espinal et al., 2021). Her supervisor, Jennifer Friedman, joined the effort in researching and writing grants to help fund this initiative. Espinal also has fleshed out the last suggestion on the list, with presentations and a book chapter on microaffections and microaffirmations as forms of “micro affirmative actions.”

### **Other Recommendations by UMass Woman of Color Librarian within a Holistic Approach**

Espinal also proposed some specific recommendations for UMass Amherst that had not been outlined in her 2018 article, but that are part of a holistic approach. In the libraries’ strategic initiatives proposal process, Espinal proposed that the diversity residency be made a permanent ongoing program with a guaranteed cohort of residents. She also proposed the creation of two new positions in the then-called Research Services department: a Native American and Indigenous Studies Community Librarian and an Afro American, Black Diaspora, and African Studies Community Librarian. For equitable library service, the fields that study racialized and oppressed groups require more librarian hours than we have structurally been allocating. Collecting materials requires more time, outreach requires more time, and individual consultations require more time. The job also often extends beyond the normal librarian official duties. Just as faculty of color often have to step in as informal advisors to students and other faculty of color, so too do librarians who serve racialized constituents and knowledge traditions have to do much work outside of the standard job description.

### **Strategic Holistic Suggestions of the UMass Amherst IDARE Committee**

When the Libraries’ Diversity and Inclusion (now IDARE) Committee was formed in 2017, the group worked to move forward on the recommendations outlined in Espinal et al. (2018), which was drafted in the year before the formation of the committee. The committee formed working groups to begin

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implementing parts of the vision proposed in Espinal et al. (2018). In addition to the projects listed in the sections above, working groups within the committee also completed these tasks:

- Coordinated a monthly anti-racism and white supremacy learning group open to all libraries' staff to raise awareness of the experiences of BIPOC staff and patrons and begin to change the libraries' culture toward one that was more inclusive
- Built an extensive curated bibliography (LibGuide) of readings, podcasts, and videos about JEDI issues. Although this guide was created and maintained with the intention of using it as an educational resource for the staff of the libraries, it was also shared and used widely throughout the university and beyond in 2020, following the nationwide protests after the murder of George Floyd.
- Worked with the libraries' administration to begin the process of reviewing and implementing HR practices that improved BIPOC recruitment and better supported BIPOC staff members who came to work at our majority white institution. The initiative to establish the BIPOC support fund is one piece of this effort.
- Developed a proposal to create an associate dean of the Libraries for Diversity and Inclusion, or a similarly high-ranking position, to coordinate a holistic approach to JEDI work within the libraries

In addition to these working groups, the committee also identified a number of additional areas to move forward on when time and staffing resources allowed. These further ideas included:

- Reviewing all current library policies and making recommendations to include diversity, inclusion, equity, access, and social justice
- Reviewing our collections to establish a baseline of how representative they are of diverse publishers, languages, cultures and perspectives

Members of the IDARE committee and others in the UMass Amherst Libraries also sought to leverage the UMass Amherst Libraries' consortial partnership with Amherst, Hampshire, Mount Holyoke, and Smith Colleges (the Five College Consortium) to learn from and creatively move forward on various JEDI initiatives. This included:

- Participating in meetings of the informally organized Five College Critical Librarianship Group, which has served as a forum to discuss, learn about, and brainstorm JEDI initiatives on our various campuses
- Participating in talks between nonadministrative staff at the Five College Libraries to create a consortium-wide version of post-baccalaureate program for BIPOC librarians, as a way to leverage Five College budgetary resources and to propose creating a multicampus post-baccalaureate cohort that would serve as more robust counterspace for the post-baccalaureate program participants than a cohort that could be created at UMass Amherst alone; this would not be a substitute for the creation of cohorts at each campus.
- Participating in and promoting JEDI events through the preexisting Five College Libraries' committee structure. For example, a Five College learning circle that engaged the book *Research as Ceremony*, which delved into Indigenous ways of knowing and researching.

## Holistic Vision of New Dean of Libraries

Of course, even this is not an exhaustive list! Our new dean of libraries has a vision for creating a holistic framework including work that complements work previously done. How we approach these ideas and strategies is a work in progress.

## A Holistic Approach to JEDI Supports BIPOC Employees—If It Doesn't Forget Them

We advocate that libraries simultaneously support BIPOC with funding and other resources for accessing counterspaces while also building a strong holistic racial equity program that includes the elements above—and more. A holistic approach is good and necessary for BIPOC individuals in many ways. For example, it is imperative to recruit more BIPOC individuals for the sake of current BIPOC individuals, to help bring more BIPOC community into the library. And recruiting more BIPOC is also not enough. Many libraries need to work on becoming less hostile and more welcoming and warm environments. Training and awareness building for white employees is also necessary to ensure they know how to be supportive and honestly not continue to perpetuate racism. In many instances, it is additionally important to not just support BIPOC as a category, but to be more specific about the communities that BIPOC encompasses and direct support in more targeted ways (Paradkar, 2021; Garcia, 2020). For example, to direct support to Black library employees, to Asian library employees, to Indigenous library employees, to Latinx library employees, acknowledging that many of these broad racial or cultural categories include subcategories as well. And libraries need to tend to intersectionality, to deal with all the other components of diversity and equity that are not only about race or racialized ethnicity because BIPOC are multidimensional with many intersecting identities. Libraries need to address neurodiversity in employees, LGBTQIA+ issues, gender equity, disability, classism, and more. But the focus and need for BIPOC support should never be left unsaid or unaddressed.

## In Other Contexts

There are many challenges to creating this kind of funding for racial equity. Even when the executive leader is a champion of JEDI, the larger sociopolitical forces may limit perceived options. In our case, we had originally proposed a separate fund called the BIPOC support fund, but had to change that approach even though we received a strong commitment from the dean to fund specific requests; it became a funding priority rather than a named program. In other contexts, the dean or director might not be as supportive. In our own case, when we started to work on this, we did not take for granted that the dean would be onboard. Before we took it to the dean and library leadership, in our discussions, librarians suggested that the funding could be crowdsourced from all the librarians. Another option is for funding to come from a union. Professional associations might be tapped as well. Without diminishing the call for action and ownership at these executive and institutional levels of the libraries, white allies and accomplices can find alternate ways to step in to support their BIPOC colleagues.

## CONCLUSION

Regardless of what libraries and institutions or white allies do to be supportive, librarians of color will seek community as a matter of survival and more. BIPOC within the field of librarianship have already produced their own spaces and are not waiting for white-dominated institutions to do that. This is the history of organizations such as the Black Caucus of ALA, REFORMA, AILA, APALA, CALA, the POC in LIS Summit, *We Here*, and others. What our approach does is direct libraries to acknowledge the need for and existence of these spaces and ask institutions to make it easier for BIPOC to take advantage of these affirming spaces by providing funding.

The new library dean is the first library leader at our university in many years who has made JEDI a centerpiece of her vision and expectation for the library and for all library employees, consistently asking us to see our work through a JEDI lens, and in that process making clear that support for BIPOC is paramount. In asking everyone in a library to take on JEDI work, it will be a continuing challenge to keep centering the voices, experiences, and needs of the traditionally marginalized so that they do not continue to be at the margins—in this case the experiences of BIPOC employees of the library. But it is a challenge that our library is committed to engaging in.

In explaining how organizations have transitioned “from DEI to JEDI,” Martinez and Truong (2021) stated that “leading with Justice and Equity is a significantly different framework” from traditional diversity and inclusion or even EDI frameworks “because it prompts us to think about the systemic barriers to access, engagement, and success at the forefront of our work and how we can transform an organization to try to eliminate these barriers” (p.).

Taking the elements that make up JEDI, we can see that financially supporting BIPOC employees to find counterspaces furthers all these elements: justice, equity, diversity and inclusion. It fosters justice because it helps provide something in the library workspace for BIPOC that they do not normally receive, but that white workers routinely receive. It fosters equity because it provides a concrete way to level the injustice and imbalance for BIPOC through funding. It fosters diversity because it supports employees who are racially different from the traditional library demographic, helping with retention of current diversity and can even act as a recruitment incentive to bring more BIPOC into a library workplace. It fosters inclusion because it takes the needs and proposals of BIPOC seriously when making budgeting decisions in the library because this is an idea that originated with BIPOC at our library and is supported by the vast literature of BIPOC in LIS.

Ultimately, we want to center the needs of BIPOC because injustices have been done to them in library workspaces that do not reflect or celebrate or let alone love their life experience and ways of being. Ultimately our aim is to promote racial healing for BIPOC library workers. We want BIPOC employees to hear the eloquent message of Fiedler & Sterling (2022):

*If you have grown weary of speaking up for what is right, representing the dissenting opinion for the benefit of the collective, knowing eyes will roll in the faculty meeting when you open your mouth, or any other scenario which has rewarded your unveiling with contempt, I want you to be recognized and validated here. I see you. I hear you. You are valid. You are necessary. You are loved HERE (p).*

Those of us who are BIPOC and have been in BIPOC library counterspaces have heard or felt some version of this when participating in BIPOC spaces, as in this example from a participant of the POC in LIS Summit (Blas et al., 2019, p. 273):



*I have never in my professional career been in a room full of beautifully diverse information professionals. I am part of a greater movement and our voices are powerful. That due to our determination, this profession is changing. Thank you for holding up a mirror to allow me to see dignity, grace, and strength within myself.*

This is an affirmation we want for everyone in the library workplace.

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