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DEIA Task Force Assessment Team Focus Group Report:

What Changes Do Library Employees Want to See?

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Executive Summary

As part of the assessment of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) activities and attitudes in the Library, as mandated by the DEIA Task Force charge, the Assessment Team held a series of focus groups designed to solicit recommendations for change. Focus groups were held throughout summer 2022 for each employee classification (Academic Professional, Civil Service, Faculty, and Graduate Students). Four primary themes emerged from the data. These themes are: 1) DEIA is not a priority, 2) DEIA is currently performative, 3) DEIA is not visible, and 4) Retention is poor because of cultural issues. Focus group participants' recommendations for change have been aggregated into a recommendations section that follows a DEIA framework.

Introduction

As part of the charge for the DEIA Task Force, an Assessment Team was formed in order "to identify a method(s) to measure the impact of the Task Force's work with improving DEIA in the library." At the beginning of the DEIA Task Force, the Assessment Team conducted a base survey. The same survey was redeployed for comparative results at the conclusion of the DEIA Task Force. In between the two surveys, the Assessment Team conducted focus groups to solicit feedback from library employees to inform actionable recommendations after the completion of the DEIA Task Force. During the spring and summer of 2022, focus groups were held, both virtual and face to face, with graduate students, civil service employees, academic professional employees, and faculty. This report discusses the results of the focus groups.

Methods

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the focus group research proposal on March 4, 2022 (IRB Protocol Number 22627). The reason for the Assessment Team seeking IRB approval was to ensure the protection of human subjects. This required that all focus group facilitators completed human subject training. The focus groups occurred during late spring and summer, 2022. All employment categories had at least one focus group. The Assessment Team contracted with Transcription Professionals to confidentially transcribe the recordings. Two members of the Assessment Team coded two of the focus group transcripts in order to normalize the coding structure. The coding process involved blind coding of different transcripts and then having multiple conversations that focused on what the major themes were that emerged from our individual examinations of the data. The normalized coding was then applied to all focus group transcripts.

Table 1: Employment Categories of Participants

Employment Category	Participants
Academic Professional	3
Civil Service (including Civil Service Professional Exempt Staff)	6
Library Faculty	4
Graduate Assistant	5
Total	**18**

Discussion

Four primary themes emerged from the focus groups. These themes are discussed below with examples from various focus groups and recommendations to address the issues discussed.

DEIA is not a priority

While library administration has put a great deal of focus on DEIA, including the hiring of the DEIA Director and the creation of the two-year DEIA Task Force, general consensus across the focus groups was that DEIA isn't actually a priority. The lack of prioritization manifested in several ways. Here, the participant discussed the lack of being included in an event because of their disability.

"Now my main crew has been really incredibly accommodating about [my disabilities], but when I see messages... about we're having an in person only thing and we won't consider an online option, [that's not ok]."

At its heart, DEIA is about difference and how people move through the world differently and in their own ways. More importantly, DEIA is about respecting those differences and focusing on how we can use our differences to treat each other well, be productive and innovative, and be respectful of each other. When DEIA is not a priority, people make assumptions that there is one way of doing things and that all other ways are inconsequential.

"But when people express this is in person only, we're not going to be doing hybrid, or if you can't come to the [department in person then] we don't want you [here]...or even when people say things like tell us the best thing about being back in person and the worst thing about working remote, gee, there's no implicit value judgements going on there at all."

Time was an issue that came up several times as an indicator that DEIA was not a priority. While the new DEIA Director has their entire job focused on DEIA work, and some library faculty members have focused their research and/or service work around DEIA topics, most library employees are not given enough or any time to engage in DEIA activities, regardless of whether those activities are professional development or working on DEIA centered projects.

"I feel like the time issue is really important. It's something that I don't think people get. I don't think that it's in anybody's job description to do any of this stuff, and thus it doesn't have any teeth. It's asking people to do more for less, or the same amount, and it's one more thing added on, and if it was something that was in your job description and it was in your annual reports, it was honored as something important beyond just oh, we're going to try and do something different, if there was a certain percentage of your time allotted for doing this, even if it was 2%, that this is a part of your job to do this, I think that would be huge."

DEIA is currently performative

Focus group participants discussed that while they appreciated DEIA initiatives, they often felt performative and that they had no real impact on making changes within the library to be more accepting of issues surrounding DEIA. The current performativity aspect of DEIA in the library was sometimes compared to the proverbial "to do" list or checkbox list of diversity.

"...sometimes with the diversity efforts, which I agree can be extremely performative, we have a really like narrow view of what diversity means sometimes within the library system and we try to like check boxes for certain groups..."

There was also a deep concern around the lack of awareness of DEIA issues by library leadership (administration, managers, supervisors, and department heads). This lack of awareness extended to topics like cultural competency and updated definitions of what diversity is and why it is important.

"But I think there is a lacking of like cultural competency education in a lot of the higher-ups in the library. Like at least from what I've seen there are kind of like the further up you go the less in touch you are with, like, diversity in any sense."

and

"And when I said that I was talking more about the older librarians who like have been there for a long time and like think about the way things are, so everything's fine, and we're doing a great job with diversity. And they...yeah, just are not aware."

The idea of DEIA as performative extends to the current make up of librarianship in general, and library administration in particular, in terms of gender and ethnicity. The UIUC Library, unfortunately, follows librarianship demographics in this regard and has been noted on by various participants. This participant in particular notes not only the disparity but also that there is a noticeable lack of visibility of minorities that we know to be present. The question then becomes, why aren't those minorities more visible?

"I'm thinking about how the library is like 90% white women, and has been for [several] years now, and it's really hard to get over that, except for administration, where it's mostly white men. So there could be a heck of a lot more racial diversity in the library, diversity of ability. And for a profession that pulls in a lot of queer people, we sure don't hear from them much."

DEIA is not visible

An interesting topic that came up throughout almost all of the focus groups is that when participants were asked the question "When you think about diversity efforts in the library, what comes to mind?", they almost unilaterally mentioned JJ Pionke as the face of diversity in the library. To be clear, JJ, though a member of the DEIA Task Force and the leader of the Assessment Team of the DEIA Task Force, was only present in one focus group (faculty). The question then becomes, why was JJ mentioned across focus groups? We believe the reason for this is that JJ is very visible in his advocacy for accessibility and for people with disabilities. He often brings up accessibility in public forums and he posts accessibility learning opportunities, as well as the Accessibility Tips emails, on libnews.

"...thinking of JJ, just always urging people to think a bit bigger and a bit more."

and

"I would definitely agree that JJ is carrying a lot of the burden of the accessibility torch. He is absolutely a champion and always out there for it."

Retention is poor because of cultural issues

A troubling aspect that emerged from the focus groups was how terribly people were treated by their colleagues. Poor treatment has led some participants to think about leaving not only the library but also the profession. These cultural issues revolve around a wide range of behaviors that are often not addressed by Library HR, administration, unit heads, or supervisors. For example, when there is bullying, a victim might make a complaint but there is no restitution for the victim, nor is there any acknowledgement that what the perpetrator did was wrong. Filing a complaint seems to be a useless endeavor that has no effect on behavior. This is especially true for some classes of library employees more than others.

"I agree with you, and actually, bottom line, one word: accountability. And the second thing, there is none. And I'm serious about that. None. Except if you are tenure track there's a ton right? How much do we know this? There's a ton. But if you've got tenure, no. And I'm tired of it. I'm so tired of it. I mean, I am tired of it to the point where I'm like is academia for me?"

and

"I think our organization is designed to incentivize people to leave. I think the organization gets a lot out of us, they get a good deal out of us. They don't pay us a cost of living raise at all. And the incentive is to go somewhere else if you are looking out for yourself."

While there are certainly major issues around pay and the serious issues of bullying and harassment, the general climate of the library is also problematic, even when it doesn't rise to the level of requiring an HR intervention. As one participant put it:

"Describe the current culture: "elitist", "afraid", "middle school", "disconnected"."

The decentralization and siloing across the library means that there is a great deal of inconsistency across several microcultures. Those who have worked in different units report that some afford a safe space, while other units can be toxic for many employees. This is borne out by participant experience:

"I think there's a significant lack of cohesion within units and within like each individual unit itself."

And

"...I think I got really lucky where I'm at [de-identified] because it seems like the people I'm working with are very much like what can we actually do."

And same respondent:

"But for the most part I think the library, like it doesn't feel... I feel very hyper aware when I'm walking through the library space, especially as I move through the different units."

Additionally, there are also concerns around the classifications within the library that prevents employees from potentially doing their best work and therefore pushes them away from the library.

"...barriers between job classes and the restrictions on who can and can't do what, depending on what the title is, I think is honestly soul crushing to a lot of people, especially the divide between faculty and non-faculty. Over the years I have watched several brilliant people leave the unit that I work with the most frequently because they were not allowed to do the type of work that they wanted to do because they were the wrong job category for it."

Recommendations

Focus group participants had clear ideas about what they wanted to see changed in the Library. Below is a list of recommendations that came out of these discussions. We've mapped these recommendations onto the DEIA framework.

DIVERSITY

- Establish a communications strategy for DEIA initiatives and activities

  Many individuals who are not on the DEIA Task Force or Diversity Committee report knowing in a vague way that DEIA work is allegedly being undertaken. However, most feel divorced from or isolated from that work, unable to articulate what work is being done and unable to point to concrete deliverables. Possibilities may include a section in Library Office Notes, scheduled Libnews announcements, blog(s), newsletter(s), and social media. As well, administration, unit heads, and other supervisors should endeavor to demonstrate, model, and be visible in DEIA work in an ongoing basis.

  An example that was highlighted as a good model is the University Libraries' Reckoning Initiative at the University of North Carolina, Chapel-Hill.

- Encourage and support outreach and engagement to the broader community

  Across more than one employee classification, employees would like the Library to be more open to, and supportive of, innovation in outreach and engagement. This includes University constituencies, especially undergraduates. However, in fulfilling the taxpayer-funded state institutional mandate of a land grant institution, employees reported that more robust outreach and engagement with the communities of Central Illinois would strengthen the value proposition of the Library as well as address DEIA considerations. These same employees often felt discouraged or devalued for trying to pursue outreach and engagement efforts that are local community-oriented.

- More marketing to the local community of what is available to them at the University Library, such as the Courtesy Card program.

EQUITY

- Establish an Ombudsperson

  There is a desire to have an anonymous resource to report to, or consult with, that is not in HR nor is a supervisor. This role is not intended to supplant existing university resources. However, individuals have reported that this could be a first step before taking on a more intimidating process of seeking assistance through the Office of Access and Equity, someone who understands the library context, and someone who can either provide advice, or pass the information along, or sometimes just to allow someone to check-in on their perceptions in a non-therapeutic environment.

- Create mentoring support across all classification levels

  Across multiple employee classifications, employees report feeling a lack of mentoring or availability of formal development. More than one-off trainings or the occasional career development webinar, employees want to learn from their more experienced and insightful peers.

- Make time a priority to do DEIA work across the entire library.

- Determine why minorities do not feel safe revealing themselves and work to dismantle those mechanisms that prevent minorities from flourishing.

- Improve transparency and accountability in Library HR processes, including creating restitution processes. Improve pay raises as well as the annual report (faculty) and performance evaluation (staff) processes that supports those raises.

- A major cultural shift needs to occur in how we work within units and together as a library-wide unit. The current culture, as discussed by participants, is toxic and problematic.

- Invite feedback from library employees about major policy changes.

INCLUSION

- Create and promote Shared Agreements and Best Practices

  Many classifications indicated an inconsistency of culture and normative behaviors across the Library. Graduate assistants who have worked in multiple units report a jarring disconnect in approaches to unit shared governance, transparency of communications, and inclusive problem-solving strategies. In short, in some units, these are robust and in other units these are non-existent. While many are concerned about Library culture, the evidence across the focus groups indicates a lack of centralized Library culture and more of a fractured culture that can cause confusion, disruption, and lack of clarity in expectations for normative behaviors. Shared Agreements and Best Practices can cover many things, including, but not limited to:
  - o Internal communications expectations
  - o Communications expectations with patrons

- o Approaches to De-escalation
- o Shared understanding of and actionable connection to the Library Mission and Guiding Principles
- o Normative behaviors that go beyond empty statements about respect and collegiality
- o Unit governance and communication expectations

- Create and actively maintain an inventory of iterative training

    Consistent, iterative, and cyclical training was mentioned in many of the focus groups. The training should be pragmatic and applicable. Examples include BEAP training. One person indicated that if the UGL tunnel is now closed, what is the protocol? Has it been communicated to BEAP coordinators? Have BEAP coordinators been encouraged to report out to their units? Other examples include wayfinding protocols for patrons needing gender-neutral or accessible restrooms and elevators that all employees should know, and have consistent, standard means of directing individuals with these needs.

- Mandate training for all employees

    Training that is critical to the Library's mission, vision, and organizing principles should be mandatory. Just as all employees should be afforded mandated training for safety protocols, if DEIA is a Library principle, DEIA training, which would include definitions and examples of DEIA is, should also be mandatory. If DEIA training remains optional and only the purview of those who are already committed to DEIA work, then it fails to be a Library value and principle and continues to be diluted, performative, and a false value and principle.

- Engage in proactive lobbying with Illinois Human Resources around diverse recruitment

    Some focus group participants indicated that they were on search committees. A lot of time is spent emphasizing the need for search committees to include diverse candidates. However, the search committee participants highlighted being puzzled as to how to do this as the process does not reflect diverse characteristics for the search committee. The sentiment was not to include these for the search process, but that this is a recruitment piece that is largely out of the hands of the search committee to address and instead should be addressed by Library HR.

ACCESSIBLITY

- Facilities Considerations
    - o Invest in remediation of existing restrooms and elevators.
    - o Both restrooms and elevators were a significant concern for many groups. Many report a lack of gender-neutral restrooms as an issue. Others report existing bathrooms are not optimal for accessibility (women's bathroom on the second floor by Administration), privacy, or a sense of safety (women's restroom on the first floor by Archives). Stacks bathrooms apparently don't have trashcans for menstrual products, are poorly signed, and aren't marked as gender neutral. There are no menstrual products or appropriate disposal receptacles in men's rooms.
    - o Establish consistent, iterative training for all employee libraries on accessible

       spaces and wayfinding protocols.
- o The accessibility terminal in the stacks isn't accessible, or comfortable, or easy to use.
- o Elevators in the stacks don't work smoothly, people get stuck in them, etc.
- o Circulation desk for Main Stacks has no lower area for short people/people in wheelchairs to use for assistance.
- Create and revise workflows to include accessibility at the start of any project, initiative, social activity, etc. so that accessibility is always a part of the conversation from the outset.

Conclusion

Focus group participants want to see change, not only for their own health and safety but also for the health and safety of their coworkers and of the patrons that visit the Library. Some recommendations will require a great deal of time, thought, and an acceptance of, and acknowledgement of where the Library has treated its employees poorly. Accountability and transparency, while not explicitly stated by participants, was definitely a recurring theme throughout the focus groups. Many of the recommendations should be easily actionable such as mandating training and making facilities repairs. Many of these facility repairs have been known about for years and it is unclear as to why they have never been addressed. Bathroom safety and access may seem inconsequential for some but for others who have been harassed in bathrooms based on their gender representation, needing to feel safe when a person is in a very vulnerable position is critical. The question then becomes, why isn't the Library taking the health and safety of its employees seriously, on bathroom and all of the issues that have been discussed in this report?

Acknowledgement

The Assessment Team would like to thank Elisabeth Paulus and Chris Prom for being focus group facilitators.

Appendix A: Focus Group Questions

Focus Group Questions

Opening Question

Please tell us your name and in a sentence what diversity means to you.

>> Facilitators can provide an example such as "I will start. My name is Jen and diversity means a happy place to work.

Introduction

Think about your experience of diversity in the Library. What aspects of diversity are the most important to you?

>> Examples: Age, ability/disability, employment categories, race, sexual orientation, etc..
>> Participants should be free to express experience inside/outside of the Library

Transition Question

When you think about diversity efforts in the Library, what comes to mind?

>> Examples: The representation (or the lack of) of library staff, perceptions of all gender bathrooms

Key Questions

Tell us a bit about what practical diversity efforts or changes you would like to see occur in the library.

If money, time, and other resources were unlimited, what changes would you like to see in the library in regards to diversity?

Ending Question

If there was one thing in the Library, in regards to diversity, that you could change, what would it be?

Of all the things that we talked about today, what is the most important to you?