

## **Developing a plan for a more diverse, inclusive, and equitable library at a Research I land-grant university: An exploration of the diversity and inclusion strategic planning process in the University Libraries at Virginia Tech.**

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### Introduction

As colleges and universities across the globe begin to pay attention to the legacy and current practice of white supremacy and racism on their campuses, many also begin to take steps to identify problematic areas of their own histories, admit that their prosperity is based on the labor of enslaved people and the value of stolen land, and in rare cases, make amends. At times this work involves removing statues of enslavers and renaming buildings previously named after wealthy white supremacists; at others it means hiring more faculty and administrators from underrepresented groups and grappling with the complexities of equity, inclusion, and diversity. Although Virginia Tech does not have the age nor the historic associations of other universities in the Commonwealth of Virginia, it still has a problematic past involving local histories of enslaved people, histories with problematic and financially generous white supremacists, and appropriations of land from Indigenous people due to the Morrill Act of 1862. In response, like many other universities, Virginia Tech is slowly working toward building a more inclusive future through self-reflection and choosing to take accountability for those who came before us to create a better future for those who will come after us. While our method has grown from our local situation, we hope our methods and choices, that of community organizing within our own library, may prove fruitful for others in similar contexts.

This future is based on the [University's new strategic plan](#) and a renewed emphasis on the University's [Principles of Community](#) (Box 1). Our library's Chief Strategy Officer [encouraged](#) all of us participating in strategic planning to consider the works of Michael E. Porter and A. G. Lafley in order to adapt a competitive-like strategy and continuously revise our services to mitigate against new and changing gaps in services that might prompt other areas of the University to appropriate them. This process called for us to make conscious, transparent, explicit choices all leading to a "superior value" proposition about the library's services to the University. Using the University strategic plan as a guide, we designed a strategic planning approach that directly engaged with University goals. We explored two areas: 1) how the Libraries could contribute to the equity-, diversity-, and inclusion-related (EDI) goals laid out in the strategic plan, and 2) how we could expand upon our efforts to broaden diversity and representation in the library.

### Literature Review

[Alice M. Cruz's 2019 article](#), "Intentional Integration of Diversity Ideals in Academic Libraries: A Literature Review," in the *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, reviewed for us the current academic literature on EDI initiatives in academic libraries, including Staffing and

Culture/Climate, which is our focus. It reinforced our thinking “that focusing solely on a fair [employment] application process will not necessarily result in a diverse pool of applicants because the approach does not consider the barriers minority applicants face.” It also reinforced our hiring and retention discussions, especially how important it is to give new employees the opportunity to participate in decision and policy making activities so they feel welcomed and valued.

Toni Anaya and Charlene Maxey-Harris authored the [2017 Diversity and Inclusion ARL SPEC Kit](#) building on 1990 and 2010 SPEC Kits that showed EDI activities in North American academic libraries “have been constantly in flux.” Like our work, they expanded EDI to include gender, sexual orientation, ability, language, religious belief, national origin, age, and ideas. Their work also evaluated the impact of evolving endeavors to see how plans may have changed and to document current practices.

The ACRL 2012 “[Diversity Standards: Cultural Competency for Academic Libraries](#)” was designed to provide a framework to support libraries engaging in “the complexities of providing services to diverse populations and recruiting and maintaining a diverse library workforce.” However, ACRL’s 2018 *Standards for Libraries in Higher Education* was not a practical help because of generalized advice like “Library personnel are professionally competent, diverse, and empowered.”

## Methods

After a short call for volunteers for the Diversity and Inclusion strategic planning subgroup, eight members from six departments volunteered to serve. We met weekly between September and December of 2019 to provide a consistent touch point between all members and to review new suggestions, materials, and feedback. Meetings were 30 minutes long to accommodate varied schedules, which resulted in “homework.” This mixture of in-person and individual work allowed the subgroup to function despite the schedule variability of its members. Homework tasks were individualized, to be completed any time before the following meeting. The majority of the literature review and early proposal drafting were completed as homework tasks. In this phase we compiled documentation gathered from peer institutions along with relevant articles and discussion pieces. By enabling each member to perform their own research, within the given weekly topics, the group collected a variety of resources and solutions.

Using Google Docs, we created and updated a notes and agendas document, which allowed us to see which topics surfaced regularly. To compile recommendations into a meaningful report, the subgroup organized recommendations into core themes grouped according to the [University’s Strategic Plan](#). We identified the following themes: accessibility, climate, employment and professional development, and outreach and advocacy. In tandem we used [Porter’s](#) (1979) five basic forces and [Lafley](#) et al.’s (2012) seven steps of strategy to prioritize recommendations and to ensure that they were actionable, comprehensive, and included metrics for success. Our group

placed emphasis on recommendations having clearly measurable metrics and outputs, so that we as a library can monitor the success and rate of adoption of these recommendations.

To transition from working document to finished report, the subgroup scheduled full- and half-day “retreats” roughly twice monthly starting in month two. The shift from information gathering to report generation necessitated uninterrupted periods of time to freely discuss all identified topics. These retreats consisted of formal work periods and informal lunch and snack breaks. The informal breaks quickly became an opportunity for the subgroup to temporarily move past the boundaries of its call and raise novel ideas or questions which we often carried back into the formal meetings to spur changes in priorities and recommendations. Additionally, we believe the camaraderie built in the informal structures led to a more holistic process where we were able to achieve outcomes more quickly than other subgroups.

## Discussion

We identified four major themes from our literature review and discussions of inclusion and diversity needs within the library: accessibility, climate, employment and professional development, outreach and advocacy, and then used these themes to develop specific recommendations for the [library’s strategic plan](#). Our recommendations included specific goal statements tied to broader university goals and paired with metrics for measuring success.

Many of our recommendations for goals fall within more than one of the identified themes. The subgroup’s report to the larger strategic planning group listed the goals and tagged them to indicate their associated themes. Here we discuss the themes individually with an overview of the goal’s intent. A reader interested in the language

### **Box 1: Virginia Tech Principles of Community** (Office for Inclusion and Diversity, 2014)

Virginia Tech is a public land-grant university, committed to teaching and learning, research, and outreach to the Commonwealth of Virginia, the nation, and the world community. Learning from the experiences that shape Virginia Tech as an institution, we acknowledge those aspects of our legacy that reflected bias and exclusion. Therefore, we adopt and practice the following principles as fundamental to our on-going efforts to increase access and inclusion and to create a community that nurtures learning and growth for all of its members:

***We affirm*** the inherent dignity and value of every person and strive to maintain a climate for work and learning based on mutual respect and understanding.

***We affirm*** the right of each person to express thoughts and opinions freely. We encourage open expression within a climate of civility, sensitivity, and mutual respect.

***We affirm*** the value of human diversity because it enriches our lives and the University. We acknowledge and respect our differences while affirming our common humanity.

***We reject*** all forms of prejudice and discrimination, including those based on age, color, disability, gender, gender identity, gender expression, national origin, political affiliation, race, religion, sexual orientation, and veteran status. We take individual and collective responsibility for helping to eliminate bias and discrimination and for increasing our own understanding of these issues through education, training, and interaction with others.

***We pledge*** our collective commitment to these principles in the spirit of the Virginia Tech motto of *Ut Prosim* (*That I May Serve*).

and metrics we used for our recommendations may want to access the [\*Virginia Tech Libraries Diversity and Inclusion Subgroup Report for the Library's Strategic Plan 2020-2025\*](#) (2019).

## Theme: Accessibility

The accessibility theme centers on preventing and removing barriers that challenge or deny access to library systems and services in all locations managed by the library. For the purposes of the subgroup's work, we used the term "accessibility" in a very broad sense meaning the quality of being easily reached and used by any user (including employees). Users should not be challenged by place, time, mode of entry, or means when using library services. Library facilities, resources, and services should be available to the global university community impartially and without barriers, including spatial barriers once at a library facility, barriers to online access and use, and temporal barriers for users in other time zones. We also identified goals for the accessibility theme aimed at hiring processes, removing ableism (discrimination and social prejudice against people with disabilities or who are perceived to have disabilities) and micro-barriers, integrating diverse perspectives into library operations and services, open access as a focus for collection development, and including rural identities in program development.

The subgroup recommended that best practices be developed for the hiring process to ensure that every employee hired (wage [hourly], staff, and faculty) has opportunities for creativity, success, training, education, and service. To address issues of ableism and micro-barriers, we recommended that the library provide educational opportunities and training to raise awareness of these issues and methods for universal design. Further, we recommended integrating diverse perspectives into the library's outreach activities, instruction, publishing, and collection development by regularly assessing the collections for diverse content and increasing the use of diverse voices in training materials.

A key component of our recommendations regarding accessibility was the implementation of sustainable approaches to collection development policies and initiatives focused on open access and publicly accessible holdings. This focus is rooted in the idea that the library should remove as many barriers to access as possible for everyone. Similarly, we applied the idea of removing barriers to the spaces (physical and virtual) that the library provides to patrons, noting that these spaces must be developed with universal design in mind so that they support people with disabilities and people with historically marginalized identities (female, intersex, trans\*, gender non-binary, LGBTQ+, racial, and ethnic identities) as fully as they do people who do not have one of these identities. In addition, the subgroup specifically acknowledged the need for the library to support rural identities throughout the Commonwealth as part of Virginia Tech's global land grant mission, including people in regions where economic disadvantage and educational elitism have been historically present.

Virginia Tech adopted and practices the Principles of Community (Box 1) as fundamental to ongoing efforts to increase access and inclusion and to create a community that nurtures learning and growth of all its members. Centering the library's work in the Principles can better increase awareness of how those Principles affect that work. We see accessibility as a component of

social justice, the concept of fair and just relations between all individuals and society. Thus, we recommended that the library educate library faculty, staff, and students to be social justice advocates ensuring that library curricula, programs, and environments are accessible. We also strongly called for the library to hire a Director of Inclusion and Diversity who can, among other duties, oversee programs in accessibility that can realize these goals.

#### Theme: Climate

The second theme we identified was climate, which we defined as creating an inclusive and safe environment where all employees and patrons of the University Libraries can thrive. Nearly every goal across all our themes addresses our desire to create and sustain this type of climate -- in essence, climate is the cornerstone of our plan. We recognize that workplace organizational climate directly affects the way employees work and interact with one another and how they support and interact with patrons. We cannot separate individual actions within the workplace from the values of the organization. These values guide our projects and seep into the work we produce, informing our interactions and insisting that we treat, and be treated by, everyone with respect. These every day interactions build and sustain our workplace, making it a desirable and safe destination for employees and patrons alike.

Changing our workplace climate is crucial to bringing the subgroup's recommendations to fruition. Changing our climate is perhaps the most challenging goal of all as it requires thoughtful and persistent action not as a separate initiative, but built into the very foundation of everything we do. In order to change our climate, we must openly acknowledge our shortfalls, celebrate our true success, and, most importantly, work consistently to move away from old, ingrained habits that, though wrong, are often most comfortable to the powerful and privileged.

#### Theme: Employment and Professional Development

Creating inclusive and equitable practices is at the core of our recruitment, hiring, retention, and professional development practices. As we work to create an environment that values inclusion and diversity, we must also work to support the success of our employees. This starts with recruitment, hiring, and professional development practices.

In exploring this theme, we found it necessary to consider employment classifications. The University Libraries at Virginia Tech has three main classifications: wage (hourly and students), staff, and faculty. Each of these classifications has its own needs with regard to recruitment, hiring, retention, and professional development. We considered those disparate needs in our recommendations.

#### Recruitment

We began by examining historic trends in hiring for the library profession and for other professions represented in the library. We identified the following trends as problematic: librarians being primarily white and female, library administration being primarily white and male, information technology being primarily white or Asian and male, and underrepresentation

of people within the LGBTQ+ umbrella, especially trans\* and non-binary individuals. One of the key challenges the subgroup had to consider was how to encourage recruitment outside these trends within United States employment law. Additionally, the subgroup considered recruitment as an aspect of the library climate with suggestions for recruiting policies that would help to change the climate over time.

We grounded our recruiting recommendations in the University's broader goals seeking to increase representation of underrepresented minority and female faculty and staff within the next few years. In order to examine the library's progress, we recommended periodic reviews of library employee demographics based on the diversity categories found in Virginia Tech's Principles of Community. Centering the library's progress in the Principles should increase awareness about how our everyday work reflects our community. As part of this effort, the subgroup recommended that before they receive funding, all departmental retreats, In-Service Days, and other broad library training events be required to include sessions on the Principles of Community.

In addition, we need to educate library faculty, staff, and student employees on social justice and research justice advocacy to make our work environment safer for underrepresented employees and students. Our curricula, programs, and environments should reflect the diversity of the communities served by the library and should elevate cultural awareness across campus.

### Hiring

Beyond recruiting, we need to make significant changes in our hiring practices. Librarianship has traditionally been a largely white female profession with white male administration. We must identify and address the barriers that perpetuate this disparity despite decades of stated diversification goals. Hiring practices are one of the most powerful catalysts for change: we should recruit and hire people who have the right intrinsic motivation to fit our desired workplace climate. Thus, we recommended that hiring managers consider a candidate's potential (over their experience) and prioritize a demonstrated commitment to social justice and research justice. Hiring managers and search committees must be aware of and utilize resources for actively recruiting faculty and staff from historically marginalized groups. Library administrators must ensure hiring managers understand their role in shaping the library climate through the hiring process.

Barriers to diverse hiring practices include a lack of transparency in the makeup of search committees and lack of transparency in assigning Diversity Search Advocates to those committees. [Diversity Search Advocates](#) are search committee members who are trained in identifying and redirecting bias in the search process. In response to these identified barriers, we recommended that all committees include a Diversity Search Advocate rather than the prior practice of only requiring one for faculty positions. We also recommended the development of centralized hiring best practices: early in the process announcing search committee membership within the library, creating job postings with equity in mind, creating guidelines on how to broadly distribute job postings, reaching out to the Office for Equity and Accessibility to ensure accessibility for interviews, tracking how candidates report hearing of job postings, ensuring that new positions are not filled before they are posted (i.e., positions are not created with a specific



candidate in mind), and allowing candidates the opportunity to share their pronouns prior to the interview process.

We recommended that all job descriptions and interview processes include explicit responsibilities for supporting inclusive work. Searches should include interview questions or presentations by the candidate related to the candidate's ability to contribute to the inclusion and diversity work of the library and the creation of an inclusive climate. To be successful in their presentation or interview, candidates must demonstrate that they are able to support a culture of inclusion.

In addition, we identified the potential for scope creep when a vacant position is posted. Recognizing that people grow into their positions over time, we must remember to scale back job duties when a vacant position is posted. Reducing the required experience for a posting would allow less experienced candidates to qualify and then grow in the position. While experience is helpful, recognizing a candidate's potential may be more important.

We also provided specific recommendations for student and wage positions. These include creating open hiring pools rather than relying on word of mouth, coordination with Career and Professional Development to list student positions in Handshake (student employment system), and requiring that student and wage supervisors have the same anti-bias training as search committees for faculty and staff positions.

### Professional Development

A sustainable climate of inclusion and diversity requires maintenance in the form of professional development around inclusion and diversity topics. Professional development also plays a significant role in supporting the retention of employees. To support sustainability, we identified the following areas: training for hiring managers, learning opportunities for employees seeking job growth, and experiential learning opportunities for student employees.

Changing hiring practices to support inclusion and diversity efforts requires training ALL hiring managers to be [diversity advocates](#). We recommended creating guidance on explicitly prioritizing a candidate's potential to contribute to a culture of inclusion as a job qualification, ensuring that hiring managers know what resources are available for developing a diverse candidate pool, and instilling awareness of a supervisor's role in retention of diverse employees. These topics should be included in supervisor onboarding and search committee training.

We recommended that library- or university-wide professional development opportunities should only be a part of this effort. Departmental training sessions on topics such as privilege and oppression, awareness of microaggressions and implicit bias, and anti-racism must be added to regular departmental meetings and retreats.

Professional development opportunities should be made available to all employees. These opportunities need to reflect opportunities for job growth within positions, job mobility within the library, and general employee growth regardless of job applicability. We recommended that the library explicitly support employee professional development for wage and staff employees

even if they have the potential to outgrow their job responsibilities and move on to different jobs. Recognizing this allows us to directly tie into the university's stated goal of increased faculty and staff satisfaction with career advancement opportunities.

Employment with the library should help equip students for lifelong success. Their employment should be educationally purposeful and train them to work in a diverse environment. All student positions should have job descriptions. Supervisors should recognize the needs of first-generation college students as they adapt to the academic environment. All student employees should receive centralized onboarding that includes diversity training. Students should also have the opportunity to serve on library councils and guiding bodies as part of their employment with the library and that service should count as paid hours.

### Retention

One of the most challenging areas for the library has been retention of a diverse workforce. Climate and compensation issues have led many library employees to seek employment elsewhere. Exploring methods for addressing these concerns led us to recommendations around salary compression and individual accountability for climate.

Salary compression (leading to disparities in compensation between similar employees) is a key issue in our library. We recommended regular review of salary bands and plans to address compression when it is identified. This is especially important for two types of employees: those who were hired at a lower wage level who have not received adjustments when the wage levels were increased and those who have not self-advocated for raises or did not receive raises comparable to peers in similar jobs. Over time, the salary discrepancies created by compression have led employees to seek employment elsewhere because they could not receive a market-comparable salary remaining in their position.

The other key issue identified for retention was climate. We recommended incentives for demonstrated individual and group progress creating and maintaining a climate supportive of diversity. We strongly called for hiring a full-time Director of Inclusion and Diversity to oversee the hiring processes. We suggested that personal statements about diversity and inclusion work be included in all annual reviews. We also recommended identifying and eliminating patterns of inequality in library retention, compensation, award, and reward trends, performance measures, and advancement.

### Theme: Outreach and Advocacy

Outreach and advocacy focus on championing and uplifting people who are experiencing or have experienced marginalization. Outreach and advocacy sit at the core of contemporary librarianship. Past practices focused on gatekeeping applied to who could enter the profession, the services provided, to whom services were offered, and the resources (books, magazines, journals, etc.) made available to library patrons. Today, librarianship looks different; however, as we work to break down our biases, we must recognize that our profession was built on the



foundation of this divisive legacy. We must actively advocate for what was systematically excluded and marginalized.

The library needs to reach out and advocate for the people it serves at the university, the local communities, and the people that do the work to keep the resources and services available. It must create accessible collections, services, and resources in which all people may see themselves. It must have diverse voices making the decisions about resources and services at the point of curation and creation. Representation at the core of the work will reduce the need for pointed outreach and advocacy. Libraries should build it into their work from the start.

At Virginia Tech, we try to be where people are: online (particularly in the time of COVID-19). We are not all librarians. We need employees who don't identify as librarians and haven't come through the traditional training structure. We need data wranglers, coders, publishers, social scientists, and many other types of specialties; we recognize that work must be done internally to reach out to the people who don't feel included by the word "librarian." This includes the students hired by the Library. Thus, we recommended that specific departmental strategies be developed for addressing inclusion and diversity by taking systemic professional trends into consideration. Information Technology has different professional trends and different historically marginalized groups than the Archival profession. We must consider these differences when reviewing library progress in addressing historical inequities.

Our recommended outreach and advocacy efforts are designed to change the demographics of who is "at the table," ensuring that the table is large enough to accommodate new groups. In this spirit, the Library is beginning to support community groups and other previously under-resourced communities with formal liaisons. Internally, we recommended restructuring Library governance models to be more inclusive. A key component of this is recognizing that libraries are not neutral; claiming neutrality reinforces the biased structural systems that have marginalized populations for millennia. Libraries must contextualize history, no matter how painful. If the Library truly wishes to ensure a welcoming, affirming, safe, and accessible climate for people who actively espouse the Principles of Community (Box 1), they should be at the core of the Library's work every day. However, the Principles of Community are only a starting place. We must continue to be mindful that the Principles must be a baseline and not an end point; our advocacy and outreach must reach beyond the identities found therein. To be able to fulfill the land grant mission in the community, we must advocate for our faculty, staff, and students to strive for social justice.

Doing the work is one step, and communicating it is another. We recommended that the Library use plain language to communicate our values. Academia often creates barriers by using jargon (language specific to a particular profession or group). In order to maintain accessibility, it is important to communicate by using plain language as much as possible. Additionally, to ensure the Library continuously makes the connection to inclusion and diversity in its daily work, we recommend that any report connected to the health of the Library (for example, the Library annual report) needs to include a statement of diversity and inclusion efforts. This incentivizes the work and incorporates it into larger frameworks, giving library employees support and accountability. Specific examples of how we communicate around DEI are roughly divided into two types of communication: formal and grassroots. The more formal communications come

from official positions, such as the Inclusion and Diversity Coordinator, or the Chair of the University Libraries Diversity Council (ULDC). Grassroots communication is initiated by anyone in the Library. We have a monthly all-library forum, and this work has a standing slot on that agenda. We have a libguide (which started as an internal google doc), a slack channel, ULDC hosts open office hours, and encourages email reports from employees on diversity and inclusion work. Outwardly, each semester we send reports to the university's Office of Inclusion and Diversity and attend monthly meetings where Diversity Directors from all university units are represented.

## Conclusion

We are definitely not done with the work, so this is merely a conclusion to this article. A conclusion is finite. A conclusion means that everything has been said and done. However, inclusion and diversity work require constant engagement and constant action to address the ever-changing needs of society. Our world is diverse. Our work is diverse. We recognize individual differences and think it is important that diversity be embraced and nurtured through inclusivity. As we strive to create a more inclusive climate, we must be able to acknowledge that we are not working in a zero-sum game: another's gain is not our loss. Creating a more inclusive work environment for a diverse world is hard, but this must not stop us from doing what is right and just for our employees, patrons, and community.

Our subgroup reflected the diversity found in the library at the time the subgroup formed. We came from different career backgrounds, and had roughly equivalent distribution of men and women, young professionals and seasoned faculty members. Some members had invisible disabilities. However, there was only one person of color. There were only two non-faculty members. There were two out members of the LGBTQ+ umbrella. There were no self-identified trans\* or non-binary people. There were no visibly disabled people. One takeaway from this process is that we should have put in the work to get a more diverse group, including a range of perspectives from diverse constituencies outside the library. It would have taken more effort to find members and bring them up to speed, but it would have made the process more inclusive and better able to serve our communities. Recognizing this allows us to move forward with the work we have accomplished while knowing that in the future we must do better.

In our library, we can count the people of color using only one hand. Our library unfortunately falls in line with the whiteness of the library profession. With this report we hope to shine the light on ourselves and our library. Reflection and self-understanding are crucial to our ability to change ourselves and grow with more attention to inclusion and diversity. We see the need for change, and we hope that this report can open our colleagues' eyes and sharpen our sights to be advocates and better allies. We also hope that this report can bring these issues to light for other libraries as well.

We know this is not a universal template for creating a Diversity and Inclusion Strategic Plan. However, we encourage you to begin this process at your institution (if you have not already), and be prepared for introspection and difficult conversations. This work is hard and uncomfortable, but it is worth it. Be present and actively listen. If it is possible to have members

of marginalized groups at your table, get them there. Create opportunities, work with supervisors, talk to the members of marginalized groups about what they need and do whatever it takes to start working toward a better working environment for all. Push for equity, not equality.

Through this process we saw how difficult it is to include marginalized voices at the table of a predominately white and female profession. Do not feel discouraged if you are struggling. There are resources to help you adjust and create more equitable climates in your spaces. Our self-reflection revealed to us how our library matches the majority white and femaleness of our profession, meaning that we have much more work to do to be truly diverse, equitable and inclusive.

Large institutions of higher education have social capital that we would be foolish not to use in this kind of work. We, as library professionals, are thought of as the keepers of knowledge. Communities look to us for guidance to learn. We have a commitment to provide knowledge that will set our communities up for success. We may falter in our journey to create a more diverse climate in our library. We expect pushback, but we will not let that stop us. We charge you to do the same. We cannot change the world alone. Neither can you. But together we can create something good that will outlive us and our institutions.

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