Advancing Social Justice through University Libraries Collections: Next steps
September 2020

Following several organization-wide conversations conducted during Summer 2020 on University Libraries collections and social justice, Executive Committee is sharing three initial steps to advance movement toward systemic change in local collections practices. Through these action steps, interested Libraries’ employees will engage in creating action plans and timelines for subsequent work. Each action step will be addressed by a workgroup.

1. **Defining our terms: How does “social justice” relate to collections work?**

The IDEAS committee has draft definitions of social justice under discussion. Working with these, the work of this workgroup will be twofold: 1. Identify the range of collections work that should be in scope for consideration in this ongoing initiative, and 2. create a values statement summarizing our organizational commitment to social justice in collections work.

Questions to consider include: How is social justice relevant to collections work? Are there collections areas/concepts that weren’t touched on in the summer conversations that we should include in our future work? Does a social justice orientation help us to prioritize our work differently? If so, how?

2. **Survey the landscape: What are others doing?**

This workgroup will identify models for potential work in areas such as: evaluating existing collections, assessing arrangement practices, description work, and discovery support. The summer conversations allowed the Libraries to identify a range of other organizations and communities that are focused on social justice and collections and have done work that we can learn from.

Questions to consider include: Which organizations and communities are doing good work in this space? How can we engage with them? What kinds of questions are they asking? Where are they seeing success or resistance? What conversations, practices, tools, or initiatives could be relevant to our own work? Do we need more learning or skills in order to participate in this work?

3. **Inventory our work: What are we already doing?**

This workgroup will do an inventory, keeping in mind that collections work includes not just collecting but also licensing and purchasing, digitization and digital preservation, access and accessibility, description, etc. From summer conversations participants made clear that there is already a lot of interest and work being done within the Libraries, but we don’t have shared knowledge of that work across the organization.
Questions to consider include: What are individuals or units doing? Where are our existing practices documented? Do we have existing partnerships that are relevant? Where do we have strengths, limitations, and gaps?

**How to volunteer and responsibilities:**

- Send email expressing your interest and which group you want to work on to Christine O'Connell (oconnell.145@osu.edu) by 10/15/2020.
- All volunteers accepted.
- Expectations for participation: attend meetings, contribute to discussion, and take on work so tasks are equitably distributed across workgroup members.
- Once workgroups members are identified, Christine will set up the first meeting. Thereafter the group will identify a convener who will identify an end date for the group work and schedule future meetings.
- Information about how progress will be regularly shared with the organization is forthcoming.

**Appendix: Background for the Collections + SJ initiative**

In June of 2020, the Ohio State University Libraries released “A Statement from University Libraries Supporting Black Lives Matter” noting:

> We have worked to build an organization that values equity, diversity, inclusion, access and social justice – a library that provides welcoming, supportive environments for all to pursue and share knowledge. But this is not enough. It is not enough to say that we value diversity, equity, and inclusion or speak about it in general terms. We must listen intently, and we must be clear in our words and actions.

As part of that work, the Libraries launched a process that will “examine our collections to ensure our investments and practices advance social justice.” This work seeks to produce significant and visible changes to our collections and collections-related functions so that they better demonstrate our commitments to social justice.

The first step in that process was initiating a set of open conversations convening employees across the Libraries. Conversations acknowledged that ideology is inscribed in our all of our collections practices and thus our collections. Decisions about description, access to content, prioritization of work that stewards collections into the future (for instance) cannot be neutral or objective. Decisions about which parts of our collections we highlight in various ways for our users cannot be free of bias. Questions posed by discussion facilitators included: What are we already doing? Where are we falling short? What changes would be high impact? What are barriers to change? Participants were asked to consider the full scope of collections and collections-related functions with the intention of surfacing many facets of where we could be doing better in Libraries work with collections. Not just focusing on growing collections, participants considered Libraries collections as they are seen and experienced by users.
Three sixty-minute, synchronous, facilitated conversations were offered and attended by 58 individuals besides the facilitators and sponsors. The conversations were conducted with two sponsors and three trained facilitators. Sponsors are Karla Strieb and Jennifer Vinopal and facilitators were Quanetta Batts, Amanda Folk, and Amy McCrory. Each session had a designated lead facilitator, a chat monitor, the sponsors took extensive notes for each conversation and the chats from each session were captured. Notes and chats were de-identified and, following the conversations, all of the de-identified notes and chat were shared with employees and a free text “survey” was created and shared with employees with two weeks provided for input (six individuals provided extensive input). Transcripts of the conversations and survey are available at:

https://osu.box.com/s/pajtm8c6ahqknks02g0gqwupxgysfayw

Conversation Themes and Threads

1. **Existing but uncoordinated work**: There are many efforts, programs, activities etc. relating to social justice, minoritized perspectives, and challenging oppression going on, but the Libraries’ work is uncoordinated and obscured across the organization. It would be helpful to understand and document what we’re already doing. For instance, there was curiosity about the work of the special collections Mary P. Key residents. Even where there is some awareness of activity, there isn’t necessarily sufficient transparency or a framework for organizing, aligning and prioritizing work.

2. **Consider existing collections**: Much conversation focused on adding to our collections with very limited consideration of our existing collections and how we are engaging them. Existing collections are an important area to look at as part of the initiative. We cannot transform our collections and collections-related functions just through new content. We also need to ensure that we are not isolating certain parts of our collections as the “social justice” or anti-racism sections. We need to apply our social justice and anti-oppression critical thinking to all of our collections and collection activities.

3. **Employee knowledge and ability to implement change**: We also need to look at the abilities and practices of existing employees, which include knowledge of relevant descriptive vocabularies, regular monitoring of evolving professional standards, and an understanding of the technologies that support good practices. Employees report feeling constrained in their ability to implement approaches that advance social justice in collections description. We should work to increase support for them in these activities. We also need to recognize that some historical materials can be very triggering for some employees who process them. Keep employee well-being in mind as we plan and assign work.

4. **Need to broaden our perspective beyond PWI**: We have many ideas, especially ideas for individual professional action. However, we did not surface many perspectives from beyond
our lens as a Predominantly White Institution. We need to find mechanisms to broaden and challenge our perspectives. Look to other non PWI organizations (e.g. HBCUs, HSIs, MSIs) that might serve as role models for us. There are other ideas, models, and innovations at other institutions and professional groups.

5. **Current processes and policies often make it difficult** to acquire non-traditional materials that would help to advance equity and social justice within in our collections, including (but not limited to) materials from certain regions of the world, works from very small publishers, and self-published materials (like zines).

6. **Our resources are finite** and often inadequate for our collections work generally. Yet we cannot make progress dependent on new resources. We need to make progress to attract new resources. To make visible shifts in our collections work we must commit to engaging our resources differently and set priorities to guide decision-making, and change our work. This applies well beyond selection to a range of other collections activities.

7. There is awareness that **partnership requires trust** that is not necessarily present now. However, we perceive multiple opportunities to build trust and partnership, serve our users, and live our values. Conversations acknowledged that trust needs to be built and that much in our history (as a land grant and a PWI, for example) and our current culture justifies distrust. To make change, relationship development will require intentional trust-building, mutual exchange and shared goals. Issues identified include:

   a. A consideration of the **language we use to describe our collections** (e.g. MD, finding aids, catalog records, etc.) and whether or not it is considered appropriate by the identities/communities represented in those collections. This could include both locally-developed descriptions, as well as descriptors developed by professional organizations.

   b. **Working with communities to help them preserve and make accessible** their own materials, rather than seeking acquisition to our collections. This means investing resources into our partners.

   c. Investment in **exploring new forms of publishing** that meet diverse communities’ needs (e.g., LatinX Talk)

8. Given the finite resources mentioned earlier, there is a potentially rich space for **partnership with Libraries and campus advancement** (gifts and grants).

Other organizations working in this space:

- University of Denver Dance Archive (content/trigger warnings at top of collections where appropriate)
- University of Texas – metadata “disappeared people”, [EXAMPLE](#)
- UC Berkeley Library, [ResponsibleAccessWorkflows](#)
• FAIR data sharing
• OCIO – Report on Responsible Operations in Data
• Allea – Sustainable and Fair Data Sharing in the Humanities
• Blackivists https://www.theblackivists.com/
• Documenting the Now https://www.docnow.io/
• Penn libraries partnering with public libraries to reach communities in Philadelphia. Their drive was not to add content to their collection – public library was positioned as the steward
• “Constructing Digital Humanities Grant Proposals as a Librarian” – https://youtu.be/kJlH3NduRY8
• DCentric
• Latinx Talk
• Disabilities Studies Quarterly
• Ohio State – Affordable Learning Exchange, Drake Institute, Anti-Racism Libguide, Black Student Association, Scarlet and Gay, Hale Black Cultural Center, Ohio State Press LatinX children’s book, Buser Collection