

**When Values Discriminate**  
**Rethinking Professionalism and Inclusion**

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The American Library Association's (ALA) Core Values of Librarianship, adopted in 2019, lists twelve values that the ALA describes as the foundation of modern librarianship and "define, inform, and guide our professional practice" (n.p.). The ALA's value of *Professionalism* "supports the provision of library services by professionally qualified personnel who have been educated in graduate programs within institutions of higher education. It is of vital importance that there be professional education available to meet the social needs and goals of library services" (n.p.). In LIS classrooms, students learn that these ALA values are meant to work in partnership together to advance the profession. But what if *Professionalism* sits in contradiction with other values including *Access* and *Diversity* and, in fact, often leads to discrimination against diverse groups and future librarians of color?

Inequity and exclusion in educating African American librarians in America has existed since the ALA was founded in 1876 and persisted without abandon throughout most of the twentieth century. During this time, the ALA "chose to ignore the issue of public library segregation rather than challenge, confront, or even discuss it until compelled by protests against segregated public libraries across the South" (Wiegand and Wiegand 2018, 185), which ultimately effected the integration and education of future African American librarians (191). Even after the landmark *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision in 1954, which "declared that racial segregation in public schools violated the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment" (Figa and MacPherson 2005, 9), integration was slow across many institutions of higher education and professions, including librarianship as evidenced by the fact that between 1962 and 1966 only 4 percent of students graduating from accredited library schools were black (20-1).

The traditional cultural environment of libraries in America continued to discriminate against diverse staff into the late twentieth century. Howland (1999) made the case that there is a continued presence of racism in the profession:

There may be a reluctance by many of the white females and males, who constitute over 80 percent of the profession, to disturb the demographics, traditional organizational structures, or rewards systems in place throughout librarianship. Although the white majority may understand the gains to be made through diversifying the profession and changing outmoded institutional dynamics, white managers also may perceive that they have a great deal to lose in terms of control, job security, and status. (6)

Smith and Wheeler (2018) observe that while the ALA champions diversity along with professionalism as core values, they seem to be in conflict with each other when “the levels of professionals of color within its ranks does not come close to reflecting the diversity in American society” (26). There have been efforts in the last few decades by the ALA and other organizations to focus on minority student recruitment into accredited MLIS programs, but the numbers of graduating African Americans from these programs remains abysmal and white women continue to make up the vast majority of professional librarians in America (26). This deficit of representation in the librarianship profession and in leadership roles reflects an unfair power structure and will not only require a redistribution of power but also changes in the mindset of current librarians and organizations like the ALA that will enable that redistribution (31).

Furthermore, once individuals from underrepresented communities have achieved an MLIS degree and are in the librarianship field as a “professional,” they are still met with obstacles and are often marginalized further in their workplaces. An environment of forced

conformity and white ideology greets many new diverse hires in libraries, and this can lead to frustration, ostracism, and ultimately burnout and resignation. To effectively serve increasingly diverse populations of patrons, libraries need to work harder to recruit, retain, and promote diverse professional staffs by providing the emotional and professional support that is necessary. “When true cultural inclusion is celebrated instead of persistent expectations of conformity, the profession stands to learn and expand” (Espinal et al. 2018, 153).

In order to make progress in this area, the ALA should turn its attention and reach out to former and current African American LIS administrators to inquire and learn about how the value of *Professionalism* has not led to improved graduation rates and retention numbers for future librarians of color and what actions they recommend occur next. A renewed focus on inclusion needs to take place to both improve ratios of African Americans in MLIS programs, graduates of these programs along with additional measures that do not leave out the many other employees that make up the working force of libraries. In fact, the very idea of maintaining “professional librarians” deepens the crisis of professionalism: “the production of a privileged group, separated and elevated in status, professionals only because some library workers are not” (Drabinski 2016, 605). Through this process, the production of hierarchies infused with power and privilege are created and *Professionalism* as an ALA core value produces and inscribes inequity and exclusion in the library workforce (605).

A new value to replace *Professionalism* should be considered; one that includes a broader array of potential librarians and does not leave out library assistants, technicians, pages and other library staff whose contributions are essential to a functioning and thriving library system. This new value also needs to encompass the aspiration of retaining MLIS

graduates of color in libraries and how the ALA can support these individuals in their professional development.

Furthermore, could there be ways the ALA could provide guidance, training, and support to promote a library technician to a librarian without requiring an MLIS degree? Not every potential student is able to take on student loan debt or pay their way through graduate school and, in fact, black students are weighed down by more student loan debt than their white peers (Smith and Wheeler 2018, 35). A message of exclusion and elitism is being sent to individuals from diverse groups who are working in the library field who want to become librarians but cannot afford to obtain an MLIS degree. Furthermore, what amazing contributions and value are we losing when we tell these individuals that the only way you will be seen as a professional in a library is when you are able to obtain this degree that has been historically obtained by whites?

The value to replace *Professionalism* should be called *Inclusion and Retention* and would encompass the many ideals the ALA professes to care about and that are intended to guide the librarianship profession. As part of the current list of values on the *Core Values of Librarianship* website, *Inclusion and Retention* could read: *The ALA recognizes the value that all library staff bring to their libraries and patrons and we are committed to providing training and professional development for these individuals regardless of if that includes obtaining an MLIS degree. It is of vital importance that there be an effort to seek ways to be inclusive of potential future librarians and find ways to promote, train, support, and retain existing talent by creating a supportive work environment that is built on cultural competency and not conformity.*

As an organization (ALA) and a profession that is overwhelmingly white, we must be conscious of our privilege and blindly following a value that inadvertently and sometimes intentionally discriminates against future librarians of color.

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