TELLING OUR STORIES

Report on Supporting & Retaining Librarians of Color

BACKGROUND:

REFORMA's IMLS-funded "Telling Our Stories" four–year grant project explores workplace realities among librarians of color focus on retention successes and shortcomings.

Guiding questions:
1. "What efforts exist to support and retain librarians of color, particularly those of Latinx background?,"
2. "What are effective support mechanisms?,"
3. "How can leaders address inequitable library work environments?"

The report is part of a multi-level project that included
• travel scholarships for LIS students to attend the 3rd National Joint Librarians of Color Conference
• a program at the 2019 ALA Annual in Washington, D.C.
• this national study on BIPOC librarian support and retention

"Our goal is to deepen the LIS field's knowledge of BIPOC librarian retention."
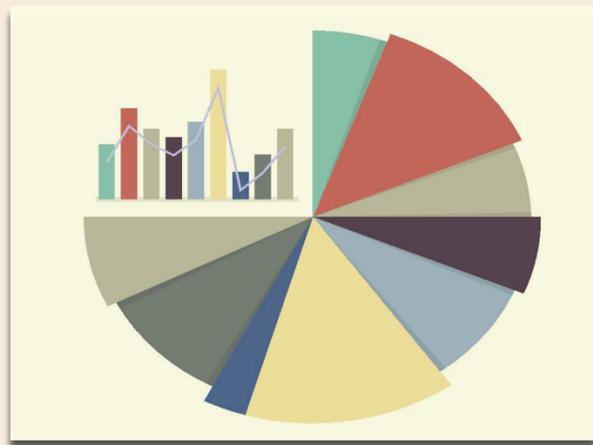
METHODOLOGY

Mixed method, explanatory design
Survey questionnaire ☐ Focus groups

Survey
- June 14 through July 14, 2021
- 7 sections
  - Personal background
  - Educational experience
  - Current work experience
  - Experiences with hiring/interview processes
  - Mentoring
  - Retention
  - Leaving the profession
- 307 useable responses
- Analysis = descriptive and inferential statistics

Focus Groups
- 120 survey participants opted-in
- 60 signed up
- 41 participated
- 6 follow-up focus groups
- September 7-23, 2021
  - reasons that librarians of color leave the filed
  - methods of increasing awareness
  - current initiatives
  - unexplored remedies
  - other insight on library environments. A copy of the focus group script is available here
  - Open, axial, selective coding
  - themes reported in vignettes

Survey Findings

Participant Demographics

HERITAGE	# (%)
Count	n=289
American Indian, Indigenous, Alaskan Native, First Nation	16(4.6%)
Asian/Asian Diasporic	60(17.4%)
African American/ Black Diasporic	76(22%)
Hispanic/Latinx	166(48.1%)
Middle Eastern/ North Africa	4(1.16%)
Mixed Heritage	26(9%)

AGE DISTRIBUTION BY BIRTH YEAR

■Count n=275

1949-1940	3
1959-1950	10
1969-1960	38
1979-1970	61
1989-1980	119
1990-2000	44
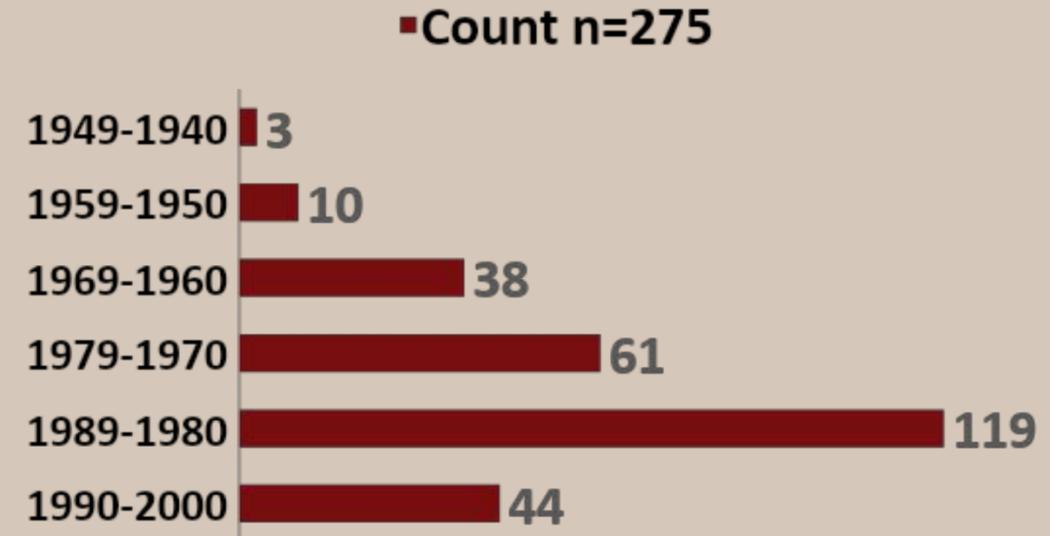
307 PARTICIPANTS

40 STATES OR TERRITORIES

GENDER IDENTITY
Count n=275

■Female
■Male
■Non-binary/Transgender
■Prefer not to say
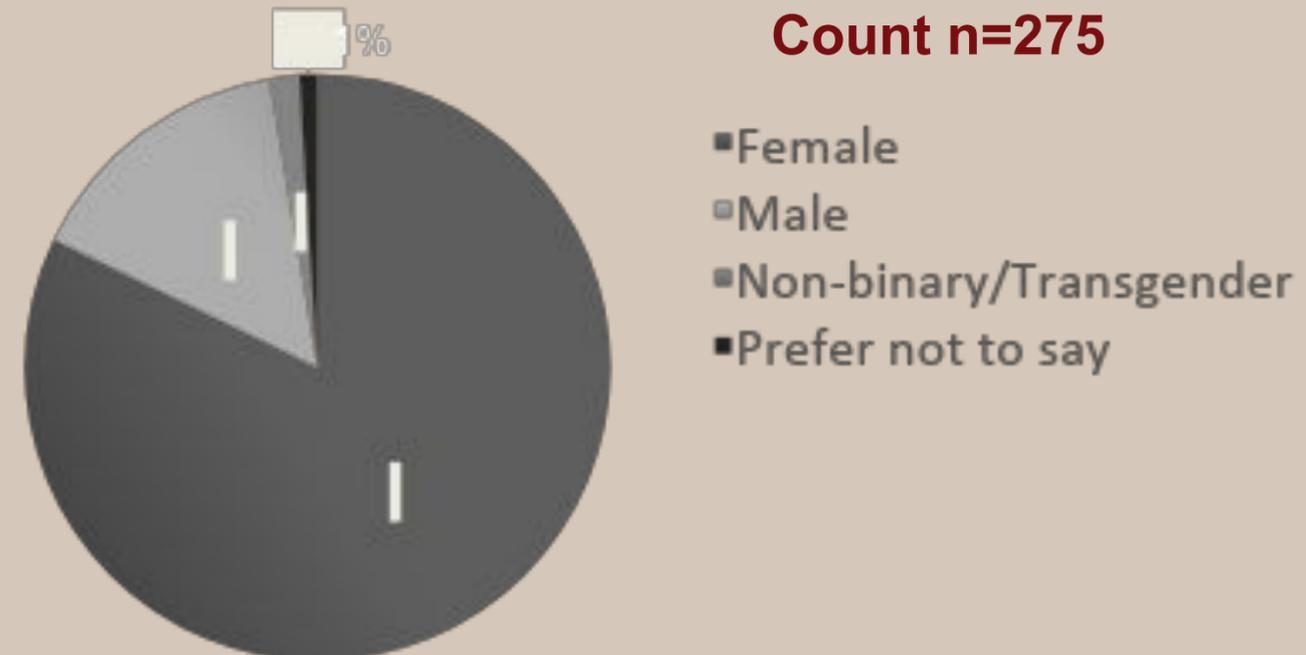
MLIS DEGREE CONFERRAL
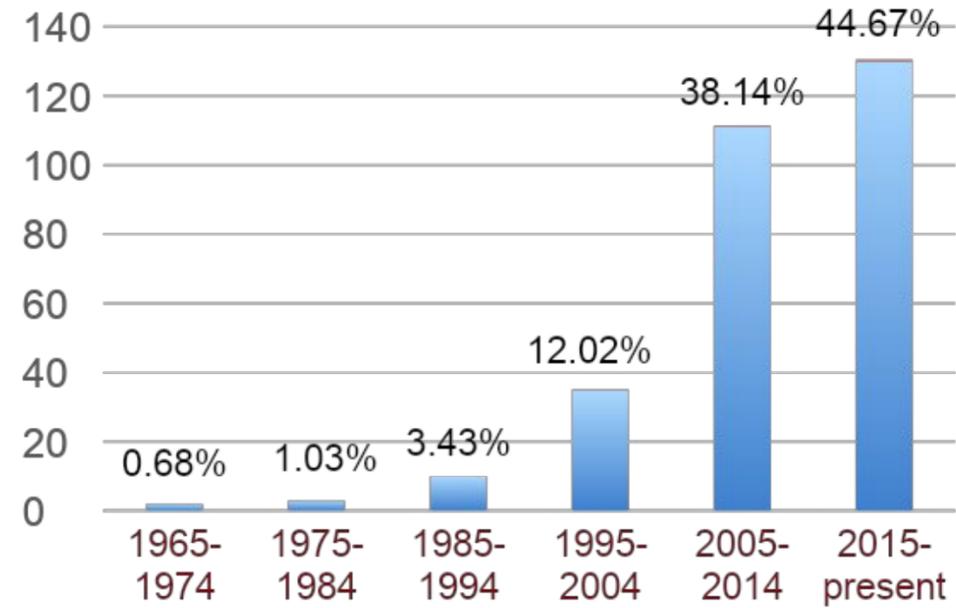
LENGTH OF TIME IN LIS FIELD

| Years	# (n)
1-10	130
11-20	111
21-26	35
27-36	10
37-46	3
47-56	2

MLIS EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE

	LIS coursework prepared me for my current position n=282	I am the first in my family to receive a master's degree (i.e., first-gen grad student) n=294	I participated in an LIS scholarship program (i.e., ALA Spectrum Scholar, Knowledge River) n=278
True	31.9%	55.4%	30.9%
Somewhat	54.6%	6.1%	1.8%
False	13.5%	38.4%	67.3%

Success Factors by Rank 1 (low – 5 (high)	Mean	Median
Student relationships	3.76	4
Family/Friends	3.57	4
LIS Faculty	3.36	3
MLIS Curriculum	2.83	3
Work colleagues	2.50	2

JOB SEEKING EXPERIENCES
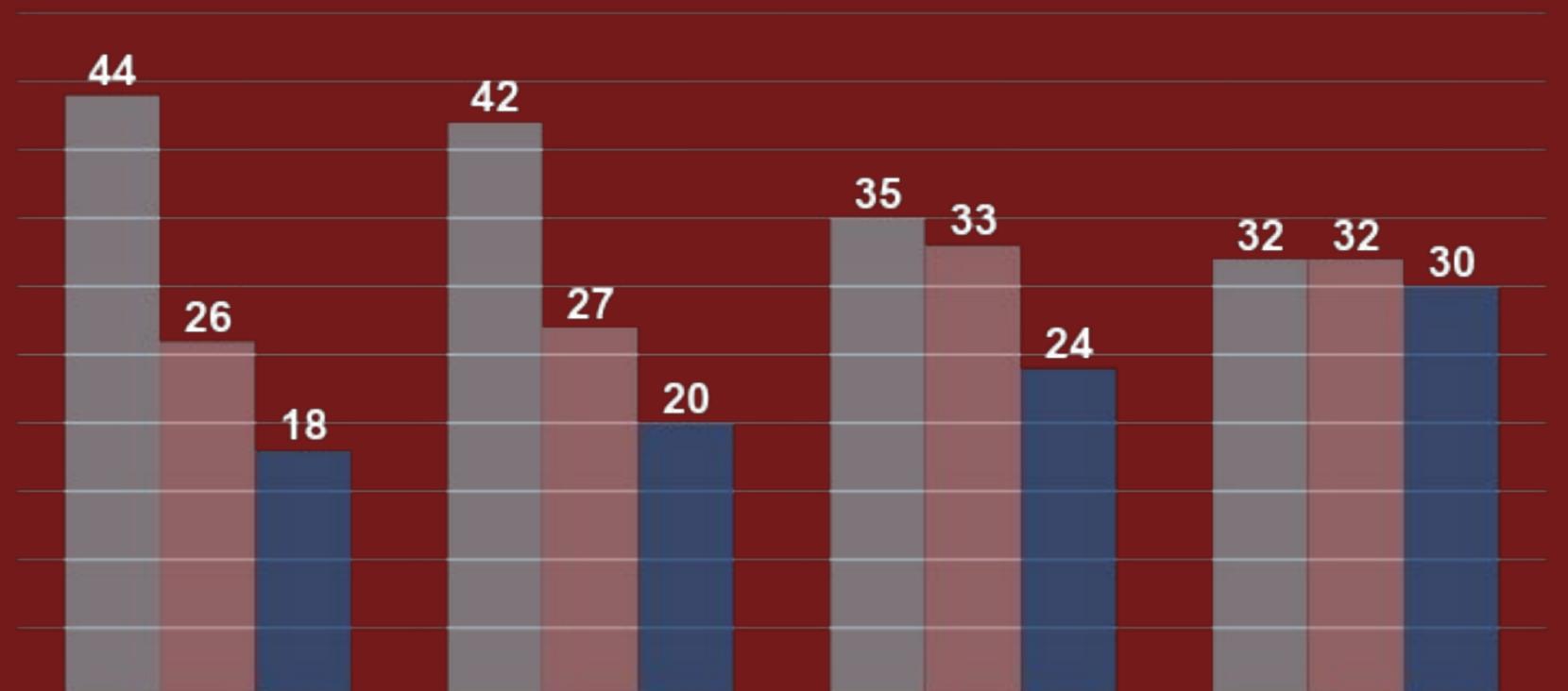
I have been able to advance in my career. — 44 / 26 / 18

Support services (i.e., mentorship, travel funding, research assistance) are available at my current workplace. — 42 / 27 / 20

There are leadership opportunities at my current workplace. — 35 / 33 / 24 ... 32 / 32 / 30

Legend: Yes / Somewhat / No

n=298	Yes	Some what	No
I was able to obtain employment in the LIS field after earning an MLIS degree.	70.5%	13.8%	8.1%
I am currently employed in a librarian position that I aspired to attain.	49.8%	31.7%	14.%
I am currently employed in a permanent librarian position (i.e., full-time librarian or archivist)	71.3%	18.4%	7.5%
I am currently employed in a conditional librarian position (i.e., tenure-track, seasonal, residency)	63.7%	18.3%	14.9%
In the past, I declined a position due to relocation expenses that were uncovered by the prospective employer.	9.3%	4.0%	86.7%
In the past, I declined an in-person interview due to lack of support for travel and accommodations.	12.4%	6.2%	81.3%
In the past, I declined a position due to lack of diversity within the organization or surrounding community.	17.6%	6.2%	72.5%

BIPOC LIBRARIAN ATTRITION

26

survey respondents (9% of the sample) indicated that they left the LIS field

FACTORS

17 (71%)
Low Salary

18 (75%)
Negative Environment

17 (71%)
Lack of Support

14 (61%)
Lack of Opportunities

RISK OF ATTRITION BY LENGTH OF TIME IN THE LIS FIELD

I am considering or have considered leaving the LIS field.

Count
120

100 98

80

60

40 39

20 11

0   3

1-10 Years   11-20 Years   21-30 Years   31+ Years

n = 2 8 2

- Yes
- No
- Series 3

❑ Among those who responded that the guidelines for job promotion are NOT clearly stated, 65% (n=100) considered leaving the LIS field.

❑ Among those who responded that they are not able to advance in their careers, 64% (n=56) considered leaving the LIS field.

❑ Among those who responded that there are few leadership opportunities at their workplace, 63% (n=97) considered leaving the LIS field.

❑ Among those who responded that there is no encouragement or support from administration, 67% (n=51) considered leaving the LIS field.

FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

1. WHAT FACTORS DO YOU BELIEVE CONTRIBUTE TO BIPOC LIBRARY WORKERS' DECISIONS TO LEAVE THE LIBRARY & IFORMATION SCIENCE FIELD?

MISCOMMUNICATION

Expression

"Things still feel the same as when I came [into the field] six years ago so the needle hasn't moved at all in terms of conversations."

Feedback

"Blindside annual reviews with no correction or prior feedback"

Meaning

We need meaningful conversations on racial healing and equity.

"Straightforward communication being interpreted as a bad attitude"

LOW MORALE

Growth

"As one of the only Latina librarians in my library system, there is a lack of support, mentorship, advancement opportunities, and progress. I've been here almost six years."

"Poorly conceived or managed fellowships/residency programs that offer little to no permanence"

'No career ladder.'

Tokenization

"Being pigeonholed into bilingual, translation, multicultural, or EDI work but not getting credit."

"Being 'the notable few' is very isolating; it's burdensome being a representative."

"My job doesn't have to be about my language or culture. I can do other jobs."

"I'm always asked to be in diversity photographs"

TYPECASTS

Underestimation

"BIPOC applicants are turned down for jobs that they are totally qualified for because [decision-makers] feel another candidate fits better with culture."

Seclusion

"No time to do things outside of my local or branch library setting including being a part of associations or connecting with people outside of your system."

2. WHAT ARE POSSIBLE WAYS OF INCREASING AWARENESS OF NOT JUST THE RECRUITMENT BUT RETENTION OF BIPOC LIBRARY WORKERS

SUPPORT

Infrastructure

"providing internal support like affinity groups and awards for those contributing to equity work in their organizations"

"safe workplace"

"salary equity"

"clear promotion guidelines"

"transparency in the onboarding process"

"support in regions that are politically hostile and where budgets are withheld"

COMMITMENT

Depth

"before a workplace wants to start recruiting for diversity, they really need to take a good hard look and think 'What are the ways we have entrenched ourselves in white supremacy, heteronormativity, and oppressive norms?' "

"avoid what I call the bureaucracy carousel - the cycle of paperwork and administration with no real change"

"more advocates inside and outside of the library, and at all levels"

"there are big expectations for employers to bring change but there's just me and a couple of other people [doing it]"

EMPOWERMENT

Agency

"need for more opportunities to get hired full-time and taken seriously"

"[permit] BIPOC library workers' to control or direct their work"

"Am I actually able to make a strategic impact by doing this work?"

3. ARE YOU FAMILIAR WITH EMPLOYEE RETENTION EFFORTS AT YOUR CURRENT ORGANIZATION? PLEASE SHARE SPECIFIC INITIATIVES GEARED TOWARD RETAINING EMPLOYEES OF COLOR, EVEN THOSE BEYOND YOUR WORKPLACE.

Mentorship across levels (entry-level, mid-career, leadership), both short and long-term

LIS programs promoting and paying for NALCO memberships - "I was really appreciative when I was a student that not only did my library school pay for one membership per year, but my library system paid for another membership."

"The Denver Public Library System pays an extra 50 cents an hour to those who speak an additional language. I have been trying for the longest to get my public library to do that because we were asked to translate and to interpret and there was no additional compensation."

Retention starts with recruitment – "[We offer] training focused on search committees and how they should conduct inclusive searches"

Tuition reimbursement or subsidies and pay equity because "there can be beneficiaries of legacy wealth - people who have the infrastructure and legacy support that many us didn't have."

Require open job searches instead of targeted or inside hires to ensure ideological and demographic diversity so that the organization does not stay the same.

Give BIPOC MLIS students of head's up on racial hostility, not to crush their optimism but to allow them to prepare and make strategic decisions and, ultimately, succeed and thrive.

4. WHAT NEW INTERVENTIONS DO YOU PROPOSE FOR RETAINING LIBRARIANS OF DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS? WHAT HAS NOT BEEN DONE? WHAT STRATEGIC ACTIONS CAN THE LIS FIELD TAKE TO ENSURE THAT LIBRARY WORKERS FEEL SUPPORTED AND VALUED?

" A lot of BIPOC library workers in our system are afraid of speaking up because they are then turned into the villains or made to be troublemakers or problematic. So, we now have institutional support for reporting incidents."

"An Ombudsperson."

"Start BIPOC librarian professional development funds. For example, more training and institutional support for conferences, association membership, time to research/present/lead on a regional or national level."

"More rigorous training for library managers and leaders. Being a good librarian does not mean you'll be a good leader. For example, lessons on avoiding toxic email communication."

"Start from the middle outward."

"Don't just hire one diversity officer who is trying to address everything all the time. Hire multiple diversity liaisons. For example, "there is a library system where a diversity officer traveled to several branches that have predominantly Black neighborhoods and I really like that model."

"Not just exit interviews but 'stay interviews' asking people why they stay and if they're thinking about leaving."

POWER

"Advocacy, bystander, and ally trainings are musts and should be consistent or perhaps offered every year. [We need] a sense of sacrifice, not gain, in addressing these issues - i.e., 'What am I giving up for BIPOC folks to be hired?'. We should institutionalize inclusiveness and change the narrative that this would be taking away from anyone."

"Encouraging earnestness [racial realism] among librarians of color does a disservice to us because the institution doesn't deserve your earnestness nor does it actually want it. We need to understand institutional politics."

FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

Part 1

SUBSTANCE

"EDI trainings are often subpar. The conversations that I am a part of in my organization or even at the campus level around things like racism and white supremacy and anti-Blackness are very amateur and perfunctory in terms of content."

"Some libraries think 'we have an anti-racism statement, land acknowledgement, and three diversity committees so we're doing good'. Diversity and inclusion are not necessarily deep."

"The message is that we're going to 'committee' this away. My workplace created three working groups to write three reports to do three separate components of an investigation about recruitment and retention. Then we combined everything into a final report and took part in a prioritizing activity. We put people in charge of every recommendation. A year later, we developed ad hoc committees based on our recommendations."

"There's much more focus on diversity programming [or public outreach], but there's not enough work on the employee support side."

WHITENESS

"Some white coworkers and managers perform that they are 'good or woke whites' for other whites but they do nothing to change conditions for BIPOC librarians and visitors."

"How do we convince white institutions, organizations, administrations, tenure and promotion committees - all of them - that if we leave that we are not lacking in any way. You lack."

"I was shocked by how much whiter the library workforce is than academia as a whole. There's an overwhelming whiteness."

"If you look at the statistics and the numbers in terms of the majority [of librarians] being white versus BIPOC, it's no wonder that we are leaving in vast mountains; there is a very large opposition that we feel that we face. "

"One thing we don't talk about is the forced competition among librarians of color. My institution said it would support only one of us to attend [an event]. There's a scarcity environment in libraries that creates competition for resources, which is white supremacist culture."

FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

Part 3

The findings from the "Telling our Stories" research project present several potential core messages for LIS decision-makers and stakeholders:

"BIPOC librarians desire deep support, empowerment, and commitment…"

BACKGROUND

- Participants represented an arrange of intersectional racial, ethnic and cultural heritages
- Majority (roughly 83%) of participants reported having 20 years or less of librarian experienced
- Same segment of the LIS workforce appears to be the most at-risk of attrition

MLIS EXPERIENCE

- Data suggests ambivalence toward the MLIS educational experience, with participants reporting both adequate and poor LIS career preparation
- Peer, family/friend, LIS faculty support = mitigating factors
- First-generation grad students + few scholarship recipients

CONCLUSION

ATTRITION

Contributors to departure
- Twenty-six respondents indicated leaving the LIS field
  - low salary
  - negative work environments
  - lack of opportunity and support

BIPOC LIBRARIAN EXPERIENCE

Factors that negatively impact BIPOC librarian experiences:
- lack of guidelines for promotion
- an inability to advance in one's career
- few leadership opportunities
- little or no support from administrators
- typecasts
- low morale
- miscommunication
- lack of autonomy and trust

CONCLUSION

TRANSFORMATION

- deep support, empowerment, and commitment
- counter library workplace rankism, classism, and racism
- fix defective systems such as ill-managed or poorly conceived programs and initiatives
- structural methods of recruiting, interviewing and onboarding
- guidelines for advancement, leadership, professional development, and permanence
- Clarity throughout the entire employment ecosystem
- institutionalize empowerment through agency, community-building, mentorship, equitable compensation, funding opportunities, earnest dialogue, and trustworthy mechanisms for reporting inequities

"

BIPOC librarians experience a disconnect between the purported welcoming, affirming role of libraries within communities versus the comparative uncertainty and strain that they encounter first-hand.

"

CONCLUSION