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Visualizing the Silent Dialogue About Race: Diversity Outreach in an Academic Library

Stephanie Everett*

The University of Akron, 302 Buchtel Commons Ave, Akron, OH 44325-1701, United States

A B S T R A C T

Purpose: This paper aims to describe the implementation and analyze the outcomes of The Race Card Project initiative at large public university's main library. Through this program, candid submissions from the public were used to promote multicultural learning and inclusivity, as well as to build campus relationships with curricular and co-curricular units engaged in diversity work on campus.

Design/methodology/approach: The paper places the university's program within the context of academic library outreach through displays and exhibits. An overview of the development and implementation is provided along with the results of a multi-year assessment of the initiative.

Originality/value: This paper describes a unique approach to cultivating conversations with and among students, faculty, and staff, about diversity and inclusion and the library's impact on fostering increased positive campus climate.

Conclusions: The mindful leveraging of the library as safe (intellectual) space provides opportunities for student learning regarding diversity and inclusion, and a platform to build collaborative campus relationships and elevate library visibility. The Race Card Project initiative has been a positive way to engage patrons with social and cultural issues about multiculturalism and inclusivity.

Introduction

One of the significant challenges facing academic libraries is the need to reach a diverse user population while simultaneously dealing with the realities of shrinking budgets and enrollments, putting pressure to think of creative ways to market ourselves (Boff, Singer, & Stearns, 2006). While library displays might be the most ubiquitous form of passive outreach conducted by an academic library, displays boost awareness of a library's collections and services and can be a surprisingly effective fulcrum for partnerships with groups across campus and help cultivate conversations in the community. There is also an increased need in our communities to facilitate conversations about race, race relations, diversity, tolerance, respect, and campus climate. An interactive library display like The Race Card Project has been an effective way to promote the library as a safe intellectual space as well as engage in campus co-curricular multicultural programming.

This research examines the use of displays in an academic library to address issues about race and diversity in the community. This paper focuses on a multiyear initiative at a large public university's main library, The Race Card Project display. Program participants were prompted to write on index cards their thoughts about race in six words

and then attach them a large display board in the middle of the lobby of the main campus library. Through the program, these candid submissions from the public were used to promote multicultural learning and inclusivity. Facilitating this display during the campus' diversity programming has proven to be a meaningful and relatively low maintenance way to build goodwill and cultivate relationships with campus while promoting diversity, inclusiveness, and related programming. Further, by describing the implementation and analyzing the outcomes of The Race Card Project initiative at the university's main library, the researcher explores how to use submissions to the university's Race Card Project display to assess the campus climate and inform future curricular and co-curricular outreach.

Literature review

Library publications have long discussed the methodology for creating, marketing, attracting, and keeping students coming to a library. Aside from collections and services, there is a body of literature that advocates for promoting the library's physical space as an asset to the community. By promoting the library as space, we are managing ambiance, trying to create a place that feels familiar and good to the

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: sdawson@uakron.edu.

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consumers of library services (Elmborg, 2011). Studies about library as space assert that as we either consciously or unconsciously create and occupy space, we define and develop that space to embody our cultural codes. Elmborg (2011) notes that once we realize that culture creates space, we can become more conscious and more intentional about what we create. Unlike schools, libraries have not traditionally been spaces dominated by educators' conceptual structures and rules defining acceptable and right. In fact, sometimes libraries are referred to as a third space- as alternatives to home and work/school (the first two places) (Elmborg, 2011). The library often functions as a center, the hub of a school, in which students and teachers talk to each other and use the available resources (Lin, Chen, & Chang, 2010). Pennington (2012) notes a third space library presents itself as space where students and teachers feel comfortable and at ease to work.

Focusing on the creation of a meaningful third space, (Elmborg, 2011, p. 349) recommends that libraries become "socially meaningful institutions with a higher role and calling". Moje et al. (2004) suggest that "third space can be viewed as a space of cultural, social, and epistemological change in which the competing knowledges and discourse of different spaces are brought into 'conversation' to challenge and reshape ... youth's everyday lives" (p. 44). (Elmborg, 2011, p. 348) elaborates that in defining the library as third space, "we diminish the distance between "them" and "us," and we make our patron's concerns and desires, rather than library concepts, the defining goals for the work we do". As a non-classroom space that promotes intellectual pursuits, the library is uniquely situated to serve as a third space with librarians being knowledgeable guides. Morales, Knowles, and Bourg (2014) go on to note, "academic librarians are perhaps uniquely equipped and empowered to define and redefine systems of knowledge that convey 'truths' about what we know about the world and how that knowledge is organized and evaluated (p.445)." The library is a space conducive to creating and representing the culture of campus or community- a safe intellectual space.

Recent economic trends have put pressure on library budgets, administrators, and academic librarians to provide and maintain successful outreach programs that engage students. The term "outreach" typically implies reaching out to non-traditional library users, extending "beyond borders" of a physical library, and promoting underutilized or new library resources (Dennis, 2012). To that end, a library exhibit is a memorable, tangible, and easily documented outreach vehicle (Fabian, D'aniello, Tysick, & Morin, 2003). As an educational tool, exhibits and displays have incredible reach as they offer opportunities for "hyperlinked" discourse and help to build positive perceptions of libraries and librarians. Fabian et al. (2003) note the numerous benefits that such collaboration around exhibits can engender, including the cultivation of relationships between the library and other on and off-campus entities, the creation of learning spaces which "complement and initiate both formal and informal educational opportunities" (p. 45), and the fact that exhibits and displays can be a powerful means of conveying library interest in issues of importance to the overall campus community.

The literature on library displays in a public or school library context is abundant, and several articles discuss displays as a prominent outreach tool utilized in various forms over the last decade. Literature from the last five years on academic outreach initiatives includes many case studies and surveys using qualitative and quantitative methods. In one such study, Gluibizzi (2009, p.116) examines low-cost/high impact ways to increase successful outreach initiatives at Ohio State University's Fine Arts Library. (Gluibizzi, 2009, p.116) describes outreach initiatives attempted at Ohio State, including partnerships with museums involving grant funding and a few creative online ventures. "Among the hindrances to effective outreach are three that face any library: lack of partners, lack of funding, and the limits of a one-size-fits-all service model that treats patrons as a monolithic profile instead of individuals". The library needs to be able to perform outreach to patrons that respects their individuality and diversity.

Carter and Seaman (2011) examined the management and support of outreach in academic libraries. The researchers conducted an exploratory survey of library outreach at academic libraries across the country, inquiring about dedicated outreach positions, outreach committees, mission statements, staff time and financial resources allocated to outreach, and libraries' future plans for outreach. Carter and Seaman (2011) describe how outreach librarians use a variety of initiatives to promote library services and resources in academic libraries finding that "overwhelmingly, campus and library events prove the most popular methods of outreach" (p. 163). The variety of outreach events can cover many different topics of community interest. Dennis (2012) studied academic libraries and identified outreach initiatives such as 'Bathroom Stall Newsletters', 'Novel Writing Month', 'African American Heritage and Cultural Read In', Webinars, iPad Forum and Annual Technology Conference concluding that a variety of initiatives are considered by librarians as outreach programs, and are primarily directed toward involving patrons in library-initiated activities. The library has a clear role in initiating community events that connect patrons and provide opportunities for conversation.

Maloney (2012) stated "well-curated displays can transform 'passive' library collections into communal spaces of discovery, cultivation, and contemplation" (p. 282). In academic libraries, displays serve an even more distinctive purpose as they offer opportunities for campus outreach, the promotion of inclusivity, and the engagement of the curiosities of their diverse user communities (Maloney, 2012). This is an important consideration as the landscape of higher education in the United States continues to diversify regarding race and ethnicity (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, 2008). The diversification of the student population will affect academic libraries as they continue to look to remain relevant and central in their campus communities. The library, as a liminal space between the curricular and co-curricular realms, is well positioned to help all members of a campus community maximize the teaching and learning opportunities such demographic diversification will offer (Maloney, 2012). Libraries must embrace diversity not only in the familiar sense of welcoming and responding to demographic differences but also regarding learning to diversify library partnerships across the campus and out into the community.

A recent example of a library playing a pivotal community role in conversations about race, race relations, diversity, tolerance, and respect has happened in public libraries. In February 2015 the American Library Association (ALA) formally commended the staff of the Ferguson Public Library for having "exemplified the library profession's core values of service and the public good during a time of civil unrest that began immediately following the shooting death of Michael Brown in August 2014" (American Library Association (ALA), 2015). The library was "providing peaceful, quiet space and time amidst the political turmoil that had been taking place within the city" (American Library Association (ALA), 2015, n.p.). While mainstream media coverage emphasized the uniqueness of the library's actions, library media such as Library Journal, American Libraries, and numerous librarian blogs countered that this was not exceptional, that this is simply what libraries do (Seale, 2016). The actions of the Ferguson Public Library illustrate how libraries are democratic spaces within which everyone can speak and be heard: libraries provide nonpolitical space for rational discourse, debate, and critique around public concerns of interest to all, as well as the information that informs them, and thereby enable and promote democracy and community (Seale, 2016).

Staller (2014) addresses how to approach talking about difficult conversations in both private and public spaces. She acknowledges that "talking *with* rather than *at* people is really hard especially when it comes to discomfiting conversations about important topics like end of life discussions with family, finances or race relations. Engaging people in a conversation is much more difficult- it is much easier to talk at them, or around them, or past them, or over them" (p. 173), but she goes on to say that even when we can avoid difficult conversations,

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