



Together We Thrive

Assessment Report on Employee Retention in Ohio's Librarian Workforce

Published August 2024. Revised March 2025

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	3
Overview	5
Background.....	5
OhioNet Together We Thrive Assessment.....	6
Methodology.....	7
Core Advisory Groups.....	7
Recommendations	10
1. Empowering All Librarians to Thrive.....	10
2. Unleashing Potential Through Inclusive Leadership.....	11
3. Embracing the Energy in Difference: Co-Creating and Sustaining an Inclusive Library Community.....	12
Consultant Observations and Lessons Learned	13
1. Valuing Librarians’ Origin Stories.....	13
2. Leadership and Librarians from Underrepresented Communities.....	14
3. Aligning Values, Goals, and Responsibilities with Organizational Capabilities.....	14
4. Realizing Librarians’ Potential in the LIS Profession and Beyond.....	14
Additional Recommendations from the Dream Summits	15
Vision Statements, Best Practices, and Research	16
Vision 1: Empowering Librarian from Underrepresented Communities to Thrive.....	16
Vision 2: Unleashing Potential through Inclusive Excellence.....	18
Vision 3: Embracing the Energy in Difference: Co-Creating and Sustaining an Inclusive Library Community.....	20
Appendix A	23
Design of the Questionnaire.....	23
References	26

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

From October 2023 to July 2024, OhioNet engaged external consultants to conduct an assessment exploring the retention of Ohio’s librarian workforce, with a focus on librarians from underrepresented communities. Collaborating with a team of six inclusive leadership library practitioners, including librarians from underrepresented communities and allies, they developed and conducted an inquiry-led assessment across OhioNet member libraries to explore retention across the librarian workforce.

Recognizing the significant harm caused by racism, inequity, and exclusion, along with the negative effects of tokenism, bias, and systemic gaps, the assessment noted that current approaches to inclusive excellence—primarily focused on addressing system dysfunction and raising awareness of systemic racism through employee learning and development—have achieved limited success and yielded mixed results (Zheng, 2024; Sugiyama et. al, 2023; Dobbin & Kalev, 2016). As a result, the consulting team adopted a new approach centered on positive organizational development. This approach integrates appreciative inquiry, inclusive excellence, and elements of intentional change theory, moving the conversation toward a strengths-based, human-centric, and relational model.

Using this approach, 40 Ohio librarians from historically underrepresented communities were interviewed to identify which organizational practices were driving meaningful and transformative change in their careers. As a result, three interdependent areas of focus emerged: (1) Empowering All Librarians to Thrive, (2) Unleashing Potential through Inclusive Libraries, and (3) Embracing the Energy in Difference. The consulting team developed vision statements and best practices for each area, describing an ideal future where libraries meaningfully integrate impactful organizational practices that enable all to thrive. These vision statements were then explored and further refined during three “dream summits” (one in-person and two virtual), which were attended by over 100 librarians from across Ohio.

Additional support is now needed to advance each interdependent area of focus, and we offer the following prioritized recommendations for OhioNet and its member libraries. We strongly recommend a programmatic approach that reinforces concepts, provides opportunities for practice over time, and creates the conditions for individual and organizational change.

See the report for further detail.

1. Empowering All Librarians to Thrive

Develop, deliver, and evaluate a comprehensive Professional Development Accelerator Program designed to empower and equip librarians including librarians from underrepresented communities for career advancement and success in the Library and Information Science (LIS) field. This dynamic program will integrate experiential learning, mentorship, career planning, and skill-building activities to help participants unlock their potential. Insights from the program can help member libraries further identify and

create effective resources to support the development and career advancement of librarians from underrepresented communities.

2. Unleashing Potential Through Inclusive Leadership

Develop, deliver, and evaluate an Inclusive Leadership Professional Development Program to enable deans, directors, and organizational development liaisons to embed impactful inclusive practices within their organizations. This program will develop strategic inclusive excellence goals, establish accountability practices, review and update organizational policies, navigate organizational tensions effectively, and close equity gaps. In addition, implementing a dynamic inter-institutional cohort model will enable collaborative learning and growth across organizations and cultivate a supportive network of leaders.

3. Embracing the Energy in Difference: Co-Creating and Sustaining an Inclusive Library Community

Develop, deliver, and evaluate a pilot program with one or two libraries that advances inclusive excellence through organizational change driven by individual and collective action. The program will enhance the ability of librarians and library staff to integrate meaningful inclusive excellence practices into their daily work and experiences through positive, human-centered organizational development methods.

By analyzing impactful inclusive excellence practices, the assessment also uncovered key conclusions:

- **Value Librarians' Origin Stories:** Recognize that librarians from underrepresented communities have unique origin stories and experiences that extend beyond traditional demographic labels.
- **Leadership and Librarians from Underrepresented Communities:** Ensure librarians from the underrepresented communities are supported by supervisors who are available and committed to their success and personal goals. Additionally create opportunities for relationship-building within the organization.
- **Aligning Values with Organizational Capabilities:** Help librarians from underrepresented communities to establish strategic boundaries and align their goals with the organization's capacity, supporting their career development and well-being, within and outside of librarianship.

However, the greatest insight into inclusive excellence practices is that the most significant impact is not achieved through traditional committees, policies, training, cultural events, or strategic plans. Instead, inclusive excellence is often achieved through authentic connections.

Moments of empowerment and investment in relationships across the organization and the LIS community, combined with inclusive leadership, are what is truly transforming the experience for librarians from underrepresented communities. The collective power of daily actions,

behaviors, and supported interactions among individuals within the LIS community bring inclusive excellence practices to life.

The assessment recommendations, methodology, and best practices included in this report radically depart from how inclusive excellence is traditionally approached and practiced in libraries. This is intentional. To reach our goals, the recommendations encourage individuals, library communities, and OhioNet to evaluate and experiment with new approaches—together.



OVERVIEW

Background

Since 2015, the American Library Association Council endorsed diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) as a strategic direction of all libraries. In response, libraries have integrated DEI as a core value, shaping their strategic directions, goals, and services. Additionally, some libraries have sought to address social justice, equity, and racism by proactively reexamining social structures and implicit beliefs about race and interracial relations in order to develop policies, practices, procedures, and programs that challenge systemic racism and, in its place, center the principles of belonging.

“Some of the greatest challenges of dismantling racism are related to defining, interpreting, and detecting racism, but also deciding what the work of antiracism should connote.”

M. Cronwell “Antiracism in Encyclopedia of Diversity and Social Justice” (2014)

However, meaningful progress towards advancing antiracist and inclusive libraries, including addressing underrepresentation in the field, remains a critical and ongoing challenge. Concerted efforts, such as diversity residencies, scholarship programs (e.g., ALA Spectrum Scholarship

program), and career development initiatives (e.g., the Kaleidoscope Program, the Minnesota Institute for Early Career Librarians, and the ARL Leadership and Career Development Program), have aimed to enhance the representation of librarians. However, the underrepresented communities in the library workforce remain largely unchanged (Kendrick, 2023), impacting not only the diverse communities served by libraries but also the potential underrepresented workforce. Research on libraries' inclusive excellence initiatives — particularly the difficulty of accurately capturing librarian demographics without rigorous tracking and reporting (Hulbert & Kendrick, 2023)—reveals limited action, a lack of scalable strategies, and insufficient role clarity among library leaders, organizations, and librarians from underrepresented communities, all of which impede significant progress in transforming existing patterns.

OhioNet Together We Thrive Assessment

In 2023, OhioNet commissioned an assessment to explore and address the retention and underrepresentation of librarians in Ohio from historically marginalized communities and the broader library and information science field. The assessment's findings are intended to guide the OhioNet board and staff in incorporating impactful organizational practices that provide greater opportunities for all librarians to thrive and developing new programs to improve recruitment and retention of talent across Ohio.

Led by external organizational development consultants, and in collaboration with a library cohort, the assessment focused on identifying organizational practices that enable all librarians to grow, lead, and thrive. By clarifying organizational practices through their impact on librarians from underrepresented communities and their careers, the assessment helps librarians, leaders, and organizations advance strategies that drive both everyday practice and systemic change. Additionally, the assessment provides insights into organizational capacity, uncovering unmet needs while highlighting the strengths and opportunities that Ohio libraries and librarians can leverage.

We want to emphasize that there is no singular way to be or define a librarian from an underrepresented community. Terms such as Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) or underrepresented communities may not always reflect how librarians from historically marginalized backgrounds self-identify. While we have opted to use the term “underrepresented communities” in our assessment report to highlight the collective voices of librarians that constitute this vibrant community, it is vital to recognize that each librarian brings their own unique identity, perspective, purpose, and expertise. As the LIS community advances inclusive excellence, we recommend approaching identity through origin stories rather than relying solely on demographic categories.

Project Goals

The following goals guided the project to identify impactful organizational practices in libraries:

- Identify and invite librarians from underrepresented communities working across Ohio libraries to participate in the assessment. Capture their experiences in diverse library organizations, including K-12 schools, public libraries, academic libraries, and special libraries.
- Develop a questionnaire using appreciative inquiry to explore librarian retention through organizational best practices, incorporating insights from inclusive excellence and leadership development.
- Identify the distinct strengths of librarians from underrepresented communities’ bring to their roles; assess the strengths and capacity of Ohio libraries in advancing effective organizational practices; and draft actionable visions for inclusive libraries based on these insights.
- Engage leaders, librarians, and library professionals in community through three Dream Summits—held in-person on May 10 and virtually on May 22 and June 5—to unpack the assessment findings. Refine the assessment visions and identify actionable next steps for OhioNet organizational strategies.

METHODOLOGY

Core Advisory Groups

To support the administration of the assessment, the lead consultants convened two advisory groups: The OhioNet Planning Team, composed of key OhioNet staff and board members, collaborated with a library cohort of six inclusive excellence practitioners, including both librarians from underrepresented communities and allies, drawn from OhioNet’s extensive network of member libraries. The lead consultants and the library cohort collectively formed the “consulting team.” The library cohort played a pivotal role in conducting structured interviews, informing the scope of the assessment questions, advising on the visions, and shaping the final recommendations.

Assessment Representation and Participation

The consulting team, in collaboration with OhioNet, purposefully sought to include representation from across Ohio and OhioNet member libraries. With input from the OhioNet Planning Team, the Library Cohort, and community partners, the consulting team identified 70 librarians from underrepresented communities working in Ohio libraries, including schools, public, academic, and special libraries. A call for participation was also issued, inviting librarians to take part in the assessment.

We found that data on librarians from underrepresented communities in Ohio’s library workforce is limited. Many institutions do not track this information, and the existing data often lacks details on retention, career growth, or reasons for departure. As a result, our consulting team

relied on their own networks as well as input from the OhioNet Planning Team, librarians' networks, library partners, and LinkedIn to identify assessment participants. Ultimately, the process highlighted a significant need for better information.

From the assembled list of 70 librarians from underrepresented communities, **40 participated in one-on-one interviews**, sharing their career experiences related to inclusive excellence, while also highlighting unmet needs encountered throughout their careers. Of the 40 librarians interviewed, 19 had worked or were working in public libraries, 15 in academic institutions, 2 in special libraries, 2 in seminary or theological schools, and 2 in K-12 schools.

Interviews with librarians from underrepresented communities

The assessment methodology used structured interviews that integrated appreciative inquiry with inclusive excellence, and concepts from intentional change theory to advance sustainable and desired change. This approach allowed the consulting team to inquire about and explore organizational practices that are most impactful for librarians from underrepresented communities, and gather information on organizational capacity, gaps, and opportunities across libraries.

The approach examined

- peak moments in librarianship
- moments of inclusion and empowerment
- impactful best practices that addressed inclusive excellence
- unmet needs
- their vision of an inclusive library, including allyship, leadership, and their role
- how to best acknowledge identity



We shifted the focus from identifying and addressing system dysfunction to uncovering the conditions that most effectively enable libraries and their staff to adopt and excel in organizational best practices. This method identifies key contributors to success and the resources that support it.

See Appendix A for the assessment questions asked of each interviewee. The questionnaire is provided as a resource for libraries to carry out their own assessments.

Appreciative Inquiry

What happens when we focus on the possibilities more than shortcoming, and do so in a manner that connects our curiosity (head)

with our compassion “heart” - first within ourselves and then with each other.”

Tanya Cruz Teller, Inspiring Inclusion with the Appreciative Inquiry Lotus Model

Appreciative Inquiry is defined as a “positive strengths-based approach to leadership development and organizational change.”¹ Its life-centric orientation provocatively shifts from a conventional top-down, diagnostic, and deficit-based approach to change, towards one that builds on strengths, potential, and innovation to achieve collective action towards a shared future. Through a dialogic, inquiry-led, relational, inclusive, and emergent process, Appreciative Inquiry helps organizations co-discover strengths, explore shared meaning, build capacity for cooperative action, and collectively design for transformative change. It invites leaders and organizations to leverage evidence-based practices from change management and positive psychology.

To learn more about appreciative inquiry, see the [introduction packet](#) available from the David L. Cooperrider Center for Appreciative Inquiry at Champlain College.

Appreciative Inquiry + Inclusive Excellence

Combining Appreciative Inquiry and Inclusive Leadership can help organizations

- Center underrepresented voices in the assessment design
- Identify existing strengths, resources, and capacity
- Draw on stories to explore the experiences of librarians in context
- Explore what is working, what is possible, and what is driving success
- Reframe challenges to discover opportunities through creativity, curiosity, and innovation, while suspending judgment
- Engage in system-wide conversations to inclusively discuss challenging topics, identify gaps, and explore collective opportunities
- Use a relational approach to build and support generative connections

Together We Thrive Dream Summits

Using the interview data and insights from the library cohort who conducted the interviews, three interdependent areas of focus emerged: (1) empowering librarians from underrepresented communities, (2) inclusive leadership, and (3) inclusive library cultures. Vision statements and best practices to support these statements were then developed for each area of focus. Both human and AI-assisted theming were employed in developing these initial visions.

The consultant team then facilitated three “*Together We Thrive*” Dream Summits—one in-person and two virtual—inviting librarians, leaders, and staff to engage with the draft vision

¹ David Cooperrider Center for Appreciative Inquiry. “About Appreciative Inquiry,” Champlain College accessed May 09, 2024, <https://appreciativeinquiry.champlain.edu/about-appreciative-inquiry/>.

statements and discuss individual and collective next steps to advance each vision. Over 100+ librarians from across Ohio participated. The Dream Summits supported participants to clarify their roles and agency in advancing impactful organizational practices through everyday actions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We propose actionable next steps to support meaningful organizational advancement for OhioNet and its member libraries. Each recommendation is designed to advance the vision statements of empowerment of all librarians, inclusive leadership, and inclusive library cultures. These recommendations build on what we heard and elevate best practices. In addition, **we strongly recommend a programmatic approach that reinforces concepts, provides opportunities for practice over time, and creates the conditions for individual and organizational change. We do not recommend stand-alone workshops. Research shows that individual workshops have mixed results and limited applicability or impact** (Zheng, 2024; Sugiyama et. al, p. 1683-1684) 2023).

1. Empowering All Librarians to Thrive

What we heard:

Key Quotes

“I remind myself that every day I can, because every day I have.”

“The best lesson I learned was to never let someone else believe more in you than you believe in yourself.”

“If I can be in an environment where I feel accepted and I’m authentic, then I can excel. But if I feel like I am not accepted for who I am, I’ve already been pushed down, and I feel I have to work harder to be acknowledged for who I am. And it may never happen.”

“I chose you for this reason. Now I need you to choose this for yourself.”

Many librarians from underrepresented communities rely on informal personal networks for career development and advancement because access to professional development resources and credible performance feedback can be inconsistent or unavailable. They seek dedicated community spaces, personalized mentoring, and targeted programming that address their unique experiences and can help them navigate the profession and build their careers.

Recommendation:

Develop, deliver, and evaluate a comprehensive Professional Development Accelerator Program designed to empower and equip all librarians for career advancement and success in the Library and Information Science (LIS) field. This dynamic program will integrate experiential learning, mentorship, career planning, and skill-building activities

to help participants unlock their potential. Key components include self-assessment tools to identify strengths and career goals, mentorship matching with experienced professionals and LIS leaders for personalized guidance and feedback, and skill development through experiential projects that enhance participants' portfolios and showcase their talents. The program could be further refined to target early- and mid-career librarians as well as those aspiring to positions of leadership. Insights from the program will help member libraries further identify and create effective resources for supporting all librarians' development and career advancement.

Best practices for librarians include:

- Recognizing and affirming their distinct values and contributions, with the confidence to express themselves and exercise influence.
- Developing an awareness of their assumptions, about themselves and others, and cultivating skill in determining whether those assumptions are true.
- Accessing and spending time in psychologically safe spaces that inspire, support connection, and emphasize inclusivity.
- Engaging in ongoing coaching and receiving constructive feedback to support their growth.

2. Unleashing Potential Through Inclusive Leadership

What we heard:

Key Quotes

“They championed me, they saw potential in me. They helped me utilize my talents and skills.”

“It takes years to build an inclusive culture, modeled by leadership where everyone supports and values one another including their input...we all experience that culture from the past director who cultivated a way for us to voice our thinking.”

“Libraries hire for diversity but manage for assimilation.”

“Listen to what I have to say, I don’t care to be asking for it.”

A leader is uniquely positioned to influence organizational culture, make a positive impact, and advance the growth of others. Their fluency in inclusive excellence can set the standard for the organization and define its limits. Inclusive leadership, as both a style and a framework for supporting strategy and change, is a skill that requires continuous development, experimentation, and refinement. Developing inclusive leaders to support all librarians and strengthen organizations.

Recommendation:

Develop, deliver, and evaluate an Inclusive Leadership Professional Development

Program to enable deans and directors as well as organizational development liaisons to embed impactful inclusive practices within their organizations. This program will develop strategic organizational goals, establish accountability practices, review and update organizational policies, navigate organizational tensions effectively, and close equity gaps. It supports individuals in developing key inclusive competencies, such as active listening, emotional intelligence, empathetic leadership, psychological safety, and cultural humility, to empower all employees. Additionally, it will help leaders better understand their critical role within the organizational system. The program includes a dynamic inter-institutional cohort model that will enable collaborative learning and growth across organizations and cultivate a supportive network of inclusive leaders.

Best practices include:

- Intentionally developing authentic and trusting relationships with all librarians and staff, creating an environment where everyone feels valued and has a clear pathway for professional growth.
- Actively acknowledging the expertise and value of all librarians, inviting them to lead initiatives with new challenges and “stretch” opportunities that advance their careers in the profession.
- Engaging in reverse mentorship and reciprocal learning, fostering growth, understanding, and continuous improvement.

3. Embracing the Energy in Difference: Co-Creating and Sustaining an Inclusive Library Community

What we heard:

Key Quotes

“We learned from each other in our practices. ...We learned a lot from each other, by experiencing each other.”

“If I can be in an environment where I feel accepted and I’m authentic, then I can excel.”

“I was embraced, and they brought me into the fold. My ideas were welcomed, and we did things together.”

“I am in meetings run by people I don’t feel safe with.”

“Allow for different work styles and allow new ideas. Let people be themselves and trust diversity.”

To advance inclusive excellence, libraries have tended to rely on committees and initiatives, overtaxing underrepresented librarians and achieving limited success. Organizations typically seek to resolve existing organizational gaps with policies and procedures, and individuals tend to seek changes in *other* people’s behavior without understanding how they themselves can shift and improve organizational patterns. To address these issues, librarians and library staff will seek to build an intentional workplace culture that enables every person to thrive. The skills needed for such

transformational change include connecting across differences, deep listening, engaging in critical conversations, and successfully navigating the tensions that naturally exist in any organization.

Recommendation:

Develop, deliver, and evaluate a pilot program with one or two libraries that supports organizational change through individual and collective action. The program will enhance the ability of librarians and library staff to incorporate effective organizational practices into their daily work and experiences through positive, human-centered organizational development methods. It will help participants shift away from top-down strategies and passive learning approaches to engage with colleagues more deeply.

Best practices include:

- Learning how to navigate tensions constructively and with compassion, recognizing and valuing the differences that make a difference.
- Giving feedback in a kind and supportive way that recipients can hear and understand; receiving feedback with an open mind, turning any defensiveness into self-reflection and an opportunity for growth.
- Fostering effective team and committee dynamics, soliciting everyone's ideas and perspectives and distributing engaging and challenging assignments.

CONSULTANT OBSERVATIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

As we worked with the consulting team, engaged with librarians from underrepresented communities, analyzed all interview data, and listened to feedback during the Dream Summits, we were struck by a number of additional observations and lessons learned that highlight key areas that would further advance inclusive excellence within libraries.

1. Valuing Librarians' Origin Stories

As part of our assessment, the consulting team listened to the origin stories of over 40 librarians, who generously shared the aspects of their ancestry, race, and/or ethnicity(ies) that are integral to their identity. We learned that each librarian's distinct origin story transcends demographic categories, revealing the intersections of race, ethnicity, and personal experiences that shape their multifaceted identity. We listened to stories of mixed families, global migration, and caregivers who worked tirelessly to provide opportunity and education for the librarians who now comprise our LIS workforce. These stories highlight identities and cultural frameworks that librarians continue to unpack as part of a legacy connecting past and future generations. We encourage the LIS community to connect with librarians' origin stories, expanding their understanding of identity beyond limited demographic categories.

2. Leadership and Librarians from Underrepresented Communities

All librarians need to be supported by supervisors who are committed to their success and personal goals, providing active support and availability. **Key leadership qualities that librarians from underrepresented communities seek include deep listening, transparency, openness, and accountability.** Additionally, librarians from underrepresented communities need to connect and build relationships with key individuals within the organization.

3. Aligning Values, Goals, and Responsibilities with Organizational Capabilities

Many librarians from underrepresented communities enter the profession with a deep commitment to supporting marginalized groups and addressing disparities. As a result, they may assume disproportionate responsibilities within their libraries and encounter ethical dilemmas as they strive to meet the needs of community members seeking their help.

All librarians are empowered to thrive when they establish strategic boundaries for advancing their work, including system change efforts and community outreach. They may need guidance in aligning their professional goals with the organization's capacity, defining what is considered “good enough,” and identifying areas for gradual development, all while prioritizing their well-being.

Without well-defined inclusive excellence goals and boundaries, librarians from underrepresented communities can become overextended, shoulder unsustainable workloads, and experience burnout.

In addition, organizational inaction on inclusive excellence goals can create dissonance for librarians from underrepresented communities, which can undermine engagement and, over time, erode trust in leadership and colleagues. We recommend organizations set clear, strategic inclusive excellence goals aligned with their mission, capacity, and reward systems. These goals should be broken down by department and role, integrated into staff responsibilities and compensation, and supported with appropriate evaluation and recognition.

4. Realizing Librarians’ Potential in the LIS Profession and Beyond

All librarians need opportunities to explore their strengths, clarify their core values, and pursue meaningful work within the library. Supervisors can help them evaluate different library career paths to find the best fit for their long-term goals, moving beyond vocational awe. **While librarianship can be a powerful avenue for social mobility and professional growth, especially for first-generation professionals, it is essential to acknowledge that over time other careers might better align with their evolving strengths and interests.** All librarians need support to fully realize their potential, whether within the library or beyond it.

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE DREAM SUMMITS

The formal programs that we recommend would have the greatest impact over time. However, depending on available resources, OhioNet may want to consider alternative ideas proposed at the Dream Summits:

Research and Data Collection on demographics of librarians

- Assist member libraries in tracking librarians from underrepresented communities, including data on retention and career progression. Recognize and highlight libraries that excel in these areas.

Build Community

- Host regular networking events for librarians from underrepresented communities to build community and connect with each other, as well as with library leaders, allies, and key partners.
- Create online avenues for librarians from underrepresented communities to connect and find each other, including through profiles.
- Host and develop inter-institutional affinity groups for idea exchange within the LIS community, ensuring inclusivity in representation of diverse identities and experiences.
- Prioritize programming for isolated librarians from underrepresented communities, providing targeted support to enhance their integration into the LIS community.
- Partner with other LIS groups and associations to create joint initiatives and programs.

Celebrate and Elevate

- Elevate the presence of librarians from underrepresented communities in Ohio by creating opportunities to celebrate their work and impact. Raise awareness of their contributions to their roles and the community.

General Professional Development

- Offer Appreciative Inquiry training for librarians and libraries.
- Offer conflict resolution and empathy training.
- Offer services and programming to support career planning for librarians seeking advancement, exploring career transitions, or setting strategic goals.

Inclusive Excellence Advancement

- Support a community of practice for inclusive excellence practitioners that facilitate information sharing, learning, and collective experimentation.
- Partner with other institutions to offer inclusive excellence training and learning opportunities (e.g. Kirwan Institute, Kaleidoscope Institute, University of Michigan, etc.)
- Share and provide access to recommended inclusive leadership and inclusive excellence resources.

Advance Inclusive Excellence at organizational levels

- Create a dedicated position, mid-career residency, or term liaison at OhioNet to spearhead inclusive excellence initiatives, actively engage with librarians from underrepresented communities, and oversee the implementation of relevant programs and events.
- Integrate inclusive excellence into OhioNet's next strategic plan.
- Elevate inclusive excellence visibility at events and conferences to underscore a strong commitment to these efforts.
- Offer organization-wide workshops and consulting services to help libraries effectively advance their inclusive leadership or inclusive excellence goals.



VISION STATEMENTS, BEST PRACTICES, AND RESEARCH

From the interview data, three interdependent areas of organizational focus emerged: (1) Empowering Librarians from Underrepresented Communities to Thrive, (2) Unleashing Potential through Inclusive Libraries, and (3) Embracing the Energy in Differences. The consulting team developed vision statements and best practices that articulate an ideal future in which libraries fully realize and meaningfully integrate impactful organizational practices. The statements focus on creating inclusive and positive library environments by strategically amplifying successful practices prototyped by Ohio libraries and librarians. Emphasizing relationships, trust-building, and initiating change within ourselves, these vision statements are written with an appreciative mindset and a strengths-based approach, highlighting personal agency and responsibility in each organizational role.

Each vision is accompanied by a literature review focused on supporting the underlying principles and best practices highlighted in the vision, drawing on the scholarship in library and information science.

Vision 1: Empowering Librarian from Underrepresented Communities to Thrive

Librarians from underrepresented communities are dynamic and influential professionals in the LIS field. Confident in the value of their purpose and identity, they serve as visionary innovators, leaders, mentors, and empowering colleagues who ignite positive change within their libraries.

Leveraging their unique expertise, backgrounds, and networks, they play a pivotal role in creating user-centric library services that transform and expand the reach of libraries. And by advocating for equitable access to information and empowerment for all, they create libraries that are truly places for everyone - where all individuals feel valued, respected, and empowered.

They serve as inspirational role models and trusted leaders within the diverse and vibrant communities they belong to and advocate for. They maintain autonomy and discernment in choosing when and how to embrace this role, recognizing that prioritizing their well-being is ultimately what matters most. Their distinct origin stories fuel their passionate engagement within libraries, actively advancing a legacy that champions opportunity through education. They adeptly navigate a delicate balance between their professional and personal/cultural identities, purposefully presenting their authentic selves as an opportunity for others to also embrace who they uniquely are. They cultivate the ability to constructively confront bias and preconceived notions, and they strategically discern whose opinions hold weight and where to focus their energy. To thrive, they center their attention on amplifying the positive relationships around them and their transformative impact within libraries.

Librarians flourish when they can connect with colleagues that share their background and values in vibrant professional communities. These dynamic networks of diverse people and ideas foster joy, creativity, innovation, and inclusivity; alleviate isolation; and provide renewal and professional growth.

As leaders, librarians from underrepresented communities pay it forward by guiding the success of the next generation of librarians. They boldly advocate for their needs and ensure the valuable work they do in the library is recognized, knowing that making their contributions visible allows people to come to know and appreciate their important contributions. They uplift other librarians from underrepresented communities by recognizing their unique strengths, celebrating their achievements, and the positive impact they make on the LIS profession every day.

Best Practices for Librarians from Underrepresented Communities

- Access to and time in psychologically safe spaces that inspire, support connection, and emphasize inclusivity.
- Engage in ongoing coaching and receive constructive feedback to support their personal and professional growth.
- Develop an awareness of their assumptions, about themselves and others, and cultivate skill in determining whether those assumptions are true.
- Seek work environments that
 - recognize and affirm their distinct value and contributions, and provide them with the confidence to express themselves and exercise influence

- acknowledge and honor them for their unique roles as vital pillars of their communities and compensate them accordingly, while not expecting them to speak on behalf of their entire community
- provide them with opportunities to lead initiatives beyond those related to identity.

Literature Review

Conscientious efforts are necessary to ensure that underrepresented librarians' involvement, contributions, and leadership roles in professional organizations, committees, task forces, and other activities focusing on underrepresented groups are neither trivialized or dismissed, but are accordingly regarded, encouraged, and supported as being as significant and as prestigious as participation in other types of organizations (Beaudin et. al, 1990). The special skills and contributions of underrepresented librarians to these activities are invaluable and should be recognized for their importance. Often such activities are a primary avenue for underrepresented librarians' professional growth, development, and contribution. By committing to a common goal of uplifting all librarians to thrive, libraries allow workers from underrepresented communities to live authentically and bring their unique and creative perspectives to meet organizational and user community needs. According to Shearer and Chiewphasa (2021), "Imagining spaces where staff from underrepresented communities thrive is forthrightly an appreciation of what can happen when power dynamics are redistributed more equitably and marginalized voices are amplified to the fullest extent possible. Asset-based perspectives allow individuals from underrepresented communities to claim their workplace instead of playing along to performative 'solutions' that fail to engage in meaningful progress and reparations."

Vision 2: Unleashing Potential through Inclusive Excellence

Inclusive leaders - frontline supervisors, managers, and library directors - empower libraries to provocatively reimagine librarianship through an inclusive excellence lens. Their actions model the standards for advancing a thriving, diverse, and inclusive LIS (Library and Information Science) workforce.

Their leadership brings the organization's inclusive excellence values to life, empowering librarians from underrepresented communities through everyday practices. They approach inclusive excellence work as fundamentally relational, inspiring collaborations across differences and skillfully addressing tensions constructively. Through their openness, active listening, empathy, commitment to transparency, and adeptness in addressing conflict and facilitating critical conversations, they create environments where authenticity and creativity can thrive. Inclusive excellence is a priority and core to what they do.

Inclusive leaders recognize that their greatest strength lies in empowering the people they work with and for. They demonstrate an unwavering commitment to their own personal growth and responsibility, embracing vulnerability as they strive to embody their best selves in leading and

serving others. To achieve this, they cultivate a culture of trust by listening deeply, communicating often, failing forward by acknowledging mistakes, and seeking continuous feedback from, and responding to, those they lead. Inclusive leaders prioritize equity and inclusion by seeking to better understand and address the individual needs of each librarian to foster their success. Leaders show librarians from underrepresented communities that their unique skills, perspectives, and contributions are valued by offering professional development opportunities, eliminating barriers to participation, and prioritizing access to mentors who advocate for them within the profession. As a result, librarians from underrepresented communities can meaningfully contribute and realize their potential in meaningful ways that align with their personal goals.

With inclusive leadership at the helm, libraries are environments where everyone can flourish.

Best Practices for Inclusive Leaders

- Intentionally develop authentic and trusting relationships with all librarians and staff, creating an environment where everyone feels safe, valued, enabled to participate, and has a clear pathway for professional growth. Be accountable for cultivating an inclusive culture.
- Embrace diversity as a foundation of strength, leverage varied perspectives and experiences to propel librarianship forward to better serve patrons and user communities. Invite engagement and dialogue with diverse and dissenting voices to better understand distinct organizational views and ideas.
- Actively connect, acknowledge, and engage the expertise of others, including librarians from underrepresented communities, inviting opportunities for librarians and staff to lead initiatives with new challenges and “stretch” opportunities that advances their careers in the profession.
- Model effective allyship, utilizing humor, working through discomfort and tensions, and embracing openness, vulnerability, and humility.
- Advance inclusive excellence to help each person reach their full potential and amplify their best selves.

Literature Review

Library leadership and direct supervisors are a primary area within organizations that can have the biggest effect on workplace culture and environment (Heady et. al, 2020). When leadership is inclusive, supervisors, managers, and administrators have the power to develop their staff by investing in them and their goals. An inclusive leader provides a workplace that is comfortable, equitable, and provides psychological safety for librarians from underrepresented communities (Magurany & Dill, 2022). This could include such actions as promoting workers to positions in which they can take part in decision making, reevaluating salaries and benefits to better support workers who come from financially impoverished communities, or dedicated funding for workers

to develop their perspective through research and scholarship. An antiracist paradigm for diversity in hiring and staffing might take this one step further to include an investment (and potential redistribution) of resources to support workers from historically marginalized communities (Brook, Ellenwood, & Lazzaro, 2015). Professionals at all stages of their careers are able to succeed when they have access to groups and networks that encourage personal growth and are attuned to the particulars of life and career situations (MacKinnon and Shepley, 2014). For librarians of color, this means having an awareness of the specific challenges minorities in monocultural environments face (Anantachai, Booker, Lazzaro, and Parker, 2016). Mentorship that allows for expressing authentic and intersectional identities requires compassionate approaches to supporting and encouraging marginalized librarians. When mentoring affirms the experiences of participants and is founded in empathy, mutual development built on trust occurs for both mentor and mentee (Lucey and White, 2017). Particularly in academic environments, librarians of color need the guidance of those who have managed to identify and overcome the challenges inherent to being a minority in higher education (Brown et. al, 2018).

Vision 3: Embracing the Energy in Difference: Co-Creating and Sustaining an Inclusive Library Community

Together, members of the library community acknowledge their active role in co-creating an appreciative and inclusive environment built on mutual care, ensuring that every person is seen, heard, and believed. They recognize that the many differences in personality, perspective, background, and experience that members bring are what enables libraries to grow and innovate.

Members acknowledge that navigating tension lies at the core of advancing meaningful inclusive excellence efforts. Understanding that tensions are normal within any organization, they proactively develop skills to navigate these situations constructively and with heart. They embrace the inherent paradoxes within groups and choose to appreciate them rather than seek to minimize, assimilate, or control them. They strive to see the best in others, actively working to transform disagreement into shared exploration, judgment into curiosity, assumptions into appreciative questions, and defensiveness into self-reflection for growth. They encourage and assist one another in engaging in critical conversations that both reinforce inclusive behaviors, accountability, and build relationships.

Members recognize that diversity, equity, and inclusion rely on a relational foundation and are best advanced through daily conversations and interactions, making incremental progress with each step. These everyday collective efforts contribute to co-creating their ideal culture, which brings them into closer alignment with their articulated inclusive values. Members seek to foster genuine connections with those who are different from themselves, actively listening to, learning from, collaborating with, and growing alongside those with an origin story distinct from their own. To do so effectively, each member is committed to honing their allyship skills in

meaningful ways, aiming to bring out their best qualities such as compassion, curiosity, empowerment, kindness, and respect. They strive to develop trusting relationships, seeking advice, sharing expertise, enjoying humor, offering grace, and apologizing when needed, while maintaining accountability to ensure continuous growth.

Inclusive libraries are a continuous work in progress. A genuine commitment to advancing inclusive excellence in impactful ways fosters inclusivity at all levels, from peer interactions to organizational decisions. With curiosity and from love, members work diligently to create safe spaces where diverse opinions can be freely expressed, enabling librarians from underrepresented communities to bring their authentic selves to the table and eliminating the need for code-switching. Inclusive libraries courageously explore and model ways of connection that embrace the energy in difference, supporting all to thrive.

Best Practices for Members of Inclusive Libraries

- Learn how to navigate tensions constructively and with compassion, recognizing and valuing the differences that make a difference.
- Give feedback in a kind and supportive way that recipients can hear and understand; receive feedback with an open mind, turning any defensiveness into self-reflection and an opportunity for growth.
- Foster effective team and committee dynamics, soliciting everyone's ideas and perspectives and distributing engaging and challenging assignments.
- Understand and practice allyship, recognizing how it differs from saviorship; strive to understand the experiences and perspectives of librarians from underrepresented communities, use individual power and privilege to amplify others' voices, and work toward creating more equitable and inclusive environments for everyone.
- Together co-create a vision of an ideal inclusive culture that articulates desired behaviors and ways of interacting, and strive to put that vision into practice. Transform inclusion from a goal into a habit by implementing the systems needed to support it.
- Recognize where the organization is now and make intentional, iterative changes through experimentation, understanding that mistakes are part of the process and perfection is not the goal. Continuously assess for impact.

Literature Review

Sense-making, community narratives, and community development practices are often inextricably tied to cultural contexts and cultural identities. As a profession, we have a pressing need to ensure our new and existing professionals reflect the cultural knowledge and experiences of those we serve in order to ensure responsive and relevant collections, services and programs. When fully realized, having a culturally competent library staff results in excellent relationships between the library and community stakeholders, improved user satisfaction, and provides a dynamic and responsive work environment for library staff as well (Rivera, 2013).

Diversity in the library workforce is worth striving for not just because it will make the profession better, but because a robust sense of social justice requires it (Peterson, 1996). Libraries in the twenty-first century should and must represent the vibrant, messy, beautiful, complicated, and diverse communities they serve. It is the responsibility of this profession to support marginalized voices and perspectives within its institutions, to be challenged by those voices, and to be changed by them (Brook, Ellenwood, & Lazzaro, 2015). A diverse and culturally competent staff is perhaps the only way to create safe, welcoming spaces and to develop the services that patrons need and want. To reach a place where library workers can use the creative potential of difference to transform academic libraries, all fronts must be acted on simultaneously, because just as the mechanisms of oppression are interlocking, resistance to them must also be complex and interwoven. More and diverse voices must be present in the conversations that determine library policy and practice, and those voices need to be invested with the power to be heard. This will require radical changes in the way that hiring and merit are determined, and an environment that will not alienate antiracist colleagues and colleagues of color, but give them room to flourish (Brook, Ellenwood, & Lazzaro). Ettarh (2014) suggests “intersectional librarianship” as a means for working effectively with diverse populations. An intersectional perspective can be developed by “learning to become allies ... not just learning about the issues that affect the underrepresented but also learning how our own biases and privileges make it difficult for us to build alliances” (Ettarh). Being surrounded by colleagues who understand their role in advancing anti-racism would allow a greater focus on DEIA work itself, without the need to constantly defend its necessity for a healthy organization. And even if resistance surrounding anti-racism efforts arise, we would be more willing to push the boundaries and confront library leadership because we could seek support from an in-house and culturally proficient underrepresented community of individuals (Shearer and Chiewphasa, 2021).

APPENDIX A

Design of the Questionnaire

The Appreciative Inquiry questionnaire was developed with guidance from the OhioNet Planning Team and the Library Cohort, drawing on interdisciplinary literature about successful retention and recruitment practices for professionals and students from underrepresented communities. The assessment questions were carefully crafted to better understand all librarians' experiences across their careers in the library and information science field focusing on the people, practices, and organizational elements that most supported or enabled their achievements, opportunities, growth, advancement, and sense of inclusion.

What factors support retention efforts:

<p>Self-efficacy</p> <p>Self-efficacy: a belief in one's abilities.</p> <p>Opportunities to develop and refine skills</p> <p>Network of resilience and support when facing prejudice/ racism</p>	<p>Professional identity and networks</p> <p>Support networks both personal and professional</p> <p>Increase experiences that reinforce professional identity with minimal personal identity interference.</p> <p>Link and leverage cultural capital with their professional identity.</p>	<p>Positive experiences</p> <p>Minimize the accumulation of negative experiences and excessive challenges</p> <p>Genuine feelings of inclusion and belonging</p> <p>Alignment with values</p> <p>Autonomy, mastery, purpose</p>	<p>Organizational commitment to inclusive excellence</p> <p>Mentoring and active sponsorship</p> <p>Proactive support from peers and leadership</p> <p>Focused programs for underrepresented communities that offer support at various stages of career development</p>
--	---	---	---

The purpose of the questionnaire is to better understand how and when librarians from underrepresented communities experience key moments of connection, inclusion, value alignment, and advocacy. It examines who supports and empowers them, what these behaviors and actions look like, and how value alignment is achieved. Additionally, the questionnaire explores librarians from underrepresented communities' vision for an inclusive library, including its leadership, culture, and roles, and how they want their identities to be acknowledged by their colleagues in this ideal environment. Each question aims to uncover the role of community, the internal relationships and interactions that make a difference, what accountability to inclusive excellence looks like for individuals and organizations, what a network of support for librarians from underrepresented communities looks like, and what environmental factors can most effectively mitigate racism, prejudice, and equity gaps.

Inclusive Excellence Questionnaire

Icebreaker

1. What is your origin story? How do you self-identify your ancestry, race and or ethnicity/ethnicities?
2. Thinking back when you first decided to become a librarian, what most attracted you to the profession? Today, what is still attracting you? What is giving you energy at work at the moment?

Peak Experience

3. As a librarian, recall a time when you felt most alive, excited, and involved in the profession.
 - a. What were the most important factors that contributed to making this a peak experience?

Empowered to Thrive

Libraries are at their best when they excel at seeing, valuing, and empowering the talents of a vibrant and representative workforce .

4. When you think back on your library career including library school, early-career experiences, or where you are now, who are the people who made a positive difference in your work life? This can include a library colleague (peer or leader) who invested in your success or professional advancement.
 - b. What did they do for you?
 - c. What specific behaviors, actions or support did they provide to you that were significant?

Culture of Inclusion

Inclusive colleagues create and foster the conditions that allow everyone - across and with their differences - to be at and to do their best, to see their value, and to belong as well as participate in ways that are safe, engaging, appreciated, and fair (Ferdman, 2021).

5. Tell me about a time when you have been part of a team or group where you felt seen and you experienced a sense of connection and belonging?
 - d. This could include a formal or informal group, a professional association, community, or other group/team setting.
 - e. How do you feel when you are in this group? What made it possible for you to contribute and why?
 - f. Could you give examples of specific behaviors and group features that made this an empowering, inspiring, and inclusive experience (e.g. communication, leadership, shared values, working style)?
 - g. Based on this story and others like it, what are some lessons, best practices to take away?

Dream of the Inclusive Library

6. Imagine you woke up two years from now, you go to work and find you are in the best library environment of your life. You know you are valued and you are energized by your work. You are growing professionally and having a significant impact.
 - h. Describe what you see? Who is doing what? What are you doing?
 - i. What has changed the most?
 - j. How are you being acknowledged and valued by colleagues and the larger organization? How is your origin story known and recognized by your colleagues?
 - k. What is exciting for you in your work?
 - l. Based on your images you just described, what are 1 or 2 action steps that would ensure that talented and enthusiastic librarians like you stay in the profession?

Celebrating our Strengths

7. Based on all the responses and stories you have shared today, what would somebody who knows you the best say are your signature strengths?



REFERENCES

- Anantachai, Tarida, Latrice Booker, Althea Lazzaro, and Martha Parker. "Establishing a Communal Network for Professional Advancement Among Librarians of Color." *Libraries' and Librarians' Publications*, January 1, 2016. <https://surface.syr.edu/sul/158>.
- Beaudin, Janice, Em Claire Knowles, Edith Maureen Fisher, and Ichiko Morita. "Recruiting the Underrepresented to Academic Libraries." *College & Research Libraries News*, 1990. <https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.51.11.1016>.
- Brook, Freeda, Dave Ellenwood, and Althea Eannace Lazzaro. "In Pursuit of Antiracist Social Justice: Denaturalizing Whiteness in the Academic Library." *Library Trends* 64, no. 2 (2015): 246–84. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lib.2015.0048>.
- Brown, Jennifer, Jennifer A. Ferretti, Sofia Leung, and Marisa L. Méndez-Brady. "We Here: Speaking Our Truth." *Library Trends* 67, no. 1 (October 25, 2018): 163–81.
- Cromwell, M., M. (2014). Antiracism. In S. Thompson (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Diversity and Social Justice* (1st ed.). Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. <https://search.credoreference.com/articles/Qm9va0FydGlibGU6NDMyNjE0?aid=97401>
- Cruz Teller, T. (2020). Inspiring Inclusion Using the Appreciative Leadership Lotus Model. In B. M. Ferdman, J. Prime, R. Riggio (Eds.), *Inclusive Leadership: Transforming Diverse Lives, Organizations, and Societies*. New York: Routledge.
- David Cooperrider Center for Appreciative Inquiry. "Appreciative Inquiry Introduction Packet." Champlain College Stiller School of Business.
- Dobbin, F., & Kalev, A. (2016). Why Diversity Programs Fail: And What Works Better. *Harvard Business Review*, 94, 52-60. <https://hbr.org/2016/07/why-diversity-programs-fail>
- Ettarh, Fobazi. (2014). "Making a new table: Intersectional librarianship." *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*. <https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2014/making-a-new-table-intersectional-librarianship-3/>.
- Ferdman, B. (2021). "Inclusive Leadership" In B. M. Ferdman, J. Prime, & R.E. Riggio (Eds.) *Inclusive leadership: transforming diverse lives, workplaces, and societies* (3-24). Routledge <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429449673>.
- Heady, Christina, Amy F. Fyn, Amanda Foster Kaufman, Allison Hosier, and Millicent Weber. "Contributory Factors to Academic Librarian Turnover: A Mixed-Methods Study." *Journal of Library Administration* 60, no. 6 (August 17, 2020): 579–99. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2020.1748425>.

- Hulbert, I. G., & Kendrick, C. (2023, April 18). *By Any Measure: The Racial Demographics of Librarians*. <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.318716>
- Kendrick, C. (2023, April 18). *Changing the Racial Demographics of Librarians*. <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.318717>
- Lucey, T. A., & White, E. S. (2017). Mentorship in Higher Education: Compassionate Approaches Supporting Culturally Responsive Pedagogy. *Multicultural Education*, 24(2), 11–17.
- MacKinnon, C., & Shepley, S. (2014). Stories of Informal Mentorship: Recognizing the Voices of Mentees in Academic Libraries. *Partnership: The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research*, 9(1). <https://doi.org/10.21083/partnership.v9i1.3000>.
- Magurany, Annmarie and Elizabeth Dill. "BIPOC Librarians and Retention: Mentorship and Supportive Relationships in the Workplace," December 2022. <https://crln.acrl.org/index.php/crlnews/article/view/25706>.
- Peterson, Lorna. "Alternative Perspectives in Library and Information Science: Issues of Race." *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science* 37, no. 2 (1996): 163–74. <https://doi.org/10.2307/40324271>.
- Rivera, Alexandra. 2013. "Indigenous knowledge and cultural competencies in the library profession: from theory to practice." In *IFLA World Library and Information Congress: 79th IFLA General Conference and Assembly, Singapore, 17-23 August 2013*.
- Shearer, Janis J., and Ben B. Chiewphasa. "Radical Re-Imagination: Centering a BIPOC Library Workforce in an Asset-Based Autoethnography." *Reference Services Review* 50, no. 1 (January 1, 2021): 113–26. <https://doi.org/10.1108/RSR-07-2021-0029>.
- Sugiyama, K., Ladge, J. J., & Bilimoria, D. (2023). Calling Oneself and Others In: Brokering Identities in Diversity Training. *Academy of Management Journal*, 66(6), 1681–1710. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2020.1579>.
- Zheng, L. (2024). What Needs to Change About DEI -- and What Doesn't. *Harvard Business Review Digital Articles*, 1–8.