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Empowering collaborations and creating brave spaces: People of Color in Library and Information Science Summit

Nataly Blas

Loyola Marymount University, nataly.blas@lmu.edu

Aisha Conner-Gaten

Loyola Marymount University, aisha.conner-gaten@lmu.edu

Rachel Deras

Loyola Marymount University, rachel.deras@gmail.com

Jesse Young

Loyola Marymount University, jesse.young@lmu.edu

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Nataly Blas, Aisha Conner-Gaten, Rachel Deras, and Jessea Young

Empowering collaborations and creating brave spaces

People of Color in Library and Information Science Summit

The William H. Hannon Library at Loyola Marymount University (LMU) in Los Angeles, California, held the first People of Color in Library and Information Science (POC in LIS) Summit on July 13, 2018. The summit was a collaborative planning effort by LMU librarians to create a productive and brave space for POC, especially women and marginalized identities, working in the information sector. The POC in LIS Summit invited participants to challenge their roles as information workers and acknowledge that dominant narratives may be disrupted.

POC in LIS Summit goals included:

- contribute to the retention of POC in LIS through community building;
- increase skill development in research, methods, and professional praxis;
- provide a space for sharing research interests and building research support systems;
- increase awareness of collegiality as self-care and wellness; and
- provide students and paraprofessionals with opportunities to present in a professional and supportive setting.

Summit idea formation

Inspired by *Pushing the Margins: Women of Color and Intersectionality in LIS Symposium* at UCLA in 2017,¹ we sought to continue conversations around equity, diversity, and inclusion while prioritizing the voices of POC working in LIS. The summit organizers were

also inspired by the upcoming 2018 Joint Conference of Librarians of Color (JCLC) and envisioned the summit as a space to collaborate pre-JCLC. The summit theme, *Empowering Collaborations*, focused on sharing research interests and building research support systems for POC in the LIS field.

In recognizing the need of a brave space for marginalized voices, the summit organizers intentionally encouraged new and nonacademic information workers to share their work and experiences. Very often at conferences, information workers are intimidated or discouraged to present about their experiences for a variety of reasons including, but not limited to: lack of professional development support, financial restrictions, mentoring deficits, noninclusive institutional practices, and so forth. It was the organizers' intent to diminish the social and institutional barriers, as well as address the imposter syndrome felt by many of the POC peers. The POC in LIS Summit encouraged the representation of diverse top-

Nataly Blas is business librarian, email: nataly.blas@lmu.edu, Aisha Conner-Gaten is instructional design librarian, email: aisha.conner-gaten@lmu.edu, Rachel Deras is former librarian-in-residence, email: rachel.deras@gmail.com, and Jessea Young is digital initiatives librarian, email: Jessea.Young@lmu.edu, at Loyola Marymount University

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ics and perspectives, including emerging LIS topics around self-care and wellness. Many of the accepted presentations expanded upon microaggressions, retention, and stereotyping while providing tangible steps to disrupt the ageism, sexism, and racism we see in LIS. Furthermore, organizers emphasized the low cost of the conference (attendees only paid for parking) in order to encourage individuals that may have financial barriers to attend.

Summit planning and lessons learned

Organizers of the POC in LIS Summit learned many valuable lessons about organizing a professional event with a planning timeline of eight months. For those seeking to host an event of their own, a project plan with goals, deadlines, and a budget must be maintained throughout the process.

- Brainstorm the conference goal(s), theme, and identify its primary audience.
- Employ a Gantt chart² to keep track of the conference timeline, and deadlines, as well to assign individual tasks.
- Upon conference/event approval, the host institution's staff should be made aware of the event goals and scope, with individual meetings with stakeholders throughout the planning process.
- Maintain transparency in regard to the event scope, details, and progress, particularly with any staff that are required to assist in planning as a part of their job function.
- Outreach and marketing are key for attracting a variety of presenters, so consider nontraditional outlets and invite new presenters

types (digital storytelling, PechaKucha, engaged discussions, etc.).

- Provide conference presenters at least six months to develop a topic for submission, and it is strongly recommended to provide additional materials in support of presentations (e.g., Presenting 101 webinar, how to create



People of Color in LIS keynote activity.

an accessible PowerPoint, how to moderate a panel, and how to assess sessions for later reflection, etc.).

- Depending on the proposed sessions, consider the diversity of the schedule (e.g. How many panels should be in one room?) as well as the expected attendance for each session.

Some events poll attendees beforehand to gauge interest and decide where each session should take place based on those results.

- Decide on assessment tools for each session and overall conference experience. Use follow-up methodologies according to your communications plan (e.g., deploying feedback survey in person at the end of the conference).
- Registrants for the event should receive immediate notifications and waitlists should be closely managed, if applicable.
- Give significant attention (and, if possible, resources) to communications and signage, as they are a large part of the success of a conference.
- Small details, like gender neutral bathrooms and an assigned social media hashtag can have a large impact on engagement at a summit.
- Prepare for post-conference activities, such as collect and analyze conference feed-

back, organize a debrief meeting with conference organizers and stakeholders, update and close the budget, create an impact/final report, and archive conference materials and presentations.

Summit results

The summit welcomed 78 information workers from more than 40 institutions. Keynote speakers Nancy Olmos, Suzanne Im, and Eva Rios-Alvarado from Librarians of Color Los Angeles (LOC-LA) kicked off the summit with impactful narratives and a call to organize for information workers at every level. Their keynote, entitled “Holding the Center: The Evolution of Librarians of Color Los Angeles,” opened with spoken word and personalized poetry reflecting on their histories and present. In the true spirit of grassroots activism and creatively organizing in professional spaces, the keynote speakers, then invited attendees to contribute to a living document—scraps of cloth with sayings, images, and thoughts to be stitched together and continued at the JCLC a few months later.

Feedback from the keynote was good (average feedback was 4.2 out of 5), and several attendees enjoyed the opportunity to hear from new and emerging leaders to start the day.

POC in LIS keynote activity

Notably, the summit created space for both public and academic information workers, often siloed at other conferences, to foster collaborations and share their experiences in LIS. Presentations, panels, and lightning talks were centered on broad themes to encourage new presenter participation, including:

- critical analysis of diversity and inclusion work in LIS,
- recruitment and retention of POC in LIS,
- collegiality as self-care,
- developing a professional identity,
- women of color in leadership,
- the tenure-track process,
- skill development in research and methods,

- sharing research interests and building support systems, and
- accessibility and barriers to access in libraries, archives, and museums.

Attendees explored honest and open conversations around racism, sexism, leadership, and self-care and felt empowered to contribute their experience and expertise to a growing community of LIS professionals looking to change the field for the better. For many, knowledge shared on self-care, networking, and new skill development was critical to their information work. One such session by Amanda Leftwich, “Redefining the Wellness Wheel for Librarians of Color,”³ defined the dimensions of wellness, barriers faced by people of color in the workplace, and made recommendations for wellness in information practice.

In “Mesearching: The Network of Whitenessharmdiversity,”⁴ presenter Joyce Gabiola explored the harmful nature of diversity work in LIS and the role of POC, from their own experience, in a profession embedded in whiteness. There were two sessions on the tenure-track experience in academic libraries, “Life in the Tenure-Track Lane, Does it Lead to Crash and Burn Out? A Preliminary Investigation and Conversation of Academic LoC Daily Experiences”⁵ with panelists Raymond Pun, Andrew Carlos, and Moon Kim and “Building Our Village: A Conversation with Librarians of Color in Tenure Track Positions”⁶ with panelists Treshani Perera, Shanee Murrain, V Dozier, and Brittany Paloma Fiedler. The panelists of both sessions shared their experiences and provided attendees strategies for finding support, time, and mentors in the tenure process. Attendees of these sessions found validation from the sessions and learned to turn a critical eye on the ways they support and motivate themselves and their communities.

As one attendee noted:

I have never in my professional career been in a room full of beautifully diverse information professionals. I

am part of a greater movement and our voices are powerful. That due to our determination, this profession is changing. Thank you for holding up a mirror to allow me to see dignity, grace, and strength within myself.

The POC in LIS Summit was a space to support the research of POC librarians and created a network of information workers for future collaboration and self-care. For more information about the summit, see the POC in LIS Summit Impact Report.⁷ A Twitter moment of the day is also available.⁸

Next steps

In contemplating the next steps, the summit organizers have begun discussing the future and sustainability of the POC in LIS Summit. Unquestionably, there is still a need to bring together a diverse group of information workers, voices, and perspectives to explore issues of diversity in our profession. Further, fueled by the positive attendee and presenter feedback, the organizers are compelled to host another event. The 2020 POC in LIS Summit will continue to create a brave space and empower all voices in LIS. The POC in LIS Summit was the subject of a panel presentation entitled “Reconceptualizing the Conference Experience: Employing Grassroots Efforts in Conference Planning to Promote Inclusivity and Accessibility” at the ACRL 2019 conference. More information from the panel is available on the conference website.⁹

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1. “Pushing the Margins: Women of Color and Intersectionality in LIS”, <http://pushingthemargins.com/symposium> (accessed February 4, 2019).

2. “Gantt chart,” Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gantt_chart (accessed February 4, 2019).

3. Amanda Leftwich, “Redefining the Wellness Wheel for Librarians of Color,” LMU Digital Commons, <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/pocinlis/2018/schedule/15/> (accessed February 4, 2019).

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5. Raymond Pun, Andrew Carlos, and Moon Kim, “Life in the Tenure-Track Lane, Does it Lead to Crash and Burn Out? A Preliminary Investigation and Conversation of Academic LoC Daily Experiences”, LMU Digital Commons, <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/pocinlis/2018/schedule/4/> (accessed February 4, 2019).

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7. Aisha Conner-Gaten, Nataly Blas, Rachel Deras, and Jessea K. Young, “People of Color in Library and Information Science Impact Report”, LMU Digital Commons, https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/librarian_pubs/99/ (accessed February 4, 2019).

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