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2 Community-Building, Empowering Voices, and Brave Spaces Through LIS Professional Conferences

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Nataly Blas, and Jessea Young*

This chapter will describe how four Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) academic librarians conceived, planned, and executed a one-day in-person summit for BIPOC information workers in 2018 to provide an engaged and supportive space in Los Angeles, California. The original four organizers of the 2018 People of Color in Library and Information Science (POC in LIS) were Nataly Blas, Aisha Conner-Gaten, Jessea Young, and Rachel Deras. In 2019, Jennifer Masunaga joined the 2021 planning team upon Rachel's departure. We, the authors, would like to acknowledge the dedication and labor of Rachel Deras; the first summit would not have been a success without her.

To address why BIPOC-centered programs are vital to the success of the LIS field, this chapter will first examine issues of inequity in conference organization and whiteness in LIS in both conference content and planning. It will also describe the steps the summit organizers took to encourage conversations regarding inclusivity and accessibility in the profession. Lastly, it will discuss summit outreach to the public, school, and academic information workers as both presenters and attendees. Specific focus will be placed on cross-professional networking that invites all information workers into a shared forum. This invitation highlighted the unheard experiences of LIS information workers who normally lacked support to attend professional events. Practical suggestions for creating similar styled events will also be provided along with resources and lessons learned from the organizers, including the move to an online format considering the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

Understanding Brave Spaces

A critical step in creating socially responsive libraries is to secure, nurture, and protect the mental health and wellbeing of its Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) information workers. Modern librarianship, information systems, and institutions have forever prioritized and normalized whiteness in public, academic, and archival spaces (Brook et al., 2015; Honma, 2005; Ossom-Williamson et al., 2020; Wheeler et al., 2004). Within these systems, BIPOC experience profound harm and are silenced for demanding action

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to unseat oppression. As Brown et al. (2018) note, the isolation felt by many People of Color (POC) in LIS stems from an overarching emphasis on whiteness; how it is performed, how it is promoted above ethnic and cultural diversity, and how it is regulated through systems and administration (p. 178). To amplify and bolster siloed BIPOC, brave spaces have been organized by BIPOC themselves, often created by special interest groups within larger organizations (Anantachai et al., 2016, Echavarria & Wertheimer, 1997).

BIPOC-only spaces promote the resistance of oppression (e.g., sexism, racism, etc.) and allow the reclamation of BIPOC identity repressed in predominantly white workplaces (Blackwell, 2018). As April Hathcock (2016) so succinctly states:

The fact is that people from the margins need safe spaces. We need places we can go to laugh, cry, scream, and shout among our own. We need exclusive spaces where we can curse our lot, speak our minds, and then dry our faces and take back up our fighting stances. We need places where we can be weak and vulnerable without being in danger or exposed.

However, when BIPOC-only spaces are formed and included in larger professional organizations, they can exclude the most vulnerable workers who cannot afford to pay dues and attend conferences.

Terminology

This chapter defines whiteness as the “normative and persistent cultural characteristics” of the white Western European culture (Brook et al., 2015) but also as an invisible “socio-cultural category” that is used to maintain the social-cultural status quo that privileges and works in favor of whites (Honma, 2005, p. 5). The organizers of the People of Color in Library and Information Summit use the terms “People of Color (POC)”, “BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color)” and “library workers of color” as a way to incorporate all non-white library and information workers. We acknowledge these generalized terms each have their criticisms, but they are used here as a way to unify members of underrepresented racial and ethnic groups within LIS (Deo, 2021; Garcia, 2020; Grady, 2020; Meraji et al., 2020).

White Invisibility and Conferences

According to membership demographics of the American Library Association (ALA), librarianship in 1998 was 86% white and in 2017, that number had risen to 87% (American Library Association, 2017). Despite the existence of many programs for librarians of color, the lack of ethnic and racial diversity in librarianship has not improved, especially in academic

libraries. As a result, academic librarians of color report feeling isolated, alienated, lonely, and frustrated by the overwhelming whiteness of the profession (Alabi, 2018, p. 135). The field has attempted to discuss its “diversity problem” by making changes to LIS curriculum, career programming, and recruitment and hiring practices (Hathcock, 2015; Jaeger et al., 2011; Tang & Adkins, 2017). However, LIS continues to maintain whiteness and does not interrogate how it reinforces and contributes to white racial normativity (Brown et al., 2018; Honma, 2015).

Fobazi Ettarh (2018) coined the phrase “vocational awe” to describe the view of libraries as an institution that is inherently good and politically neutral. When we frame the library as a politically neutral place, we are less inclined to see how librarianship is built on and upholds racial hierarchies and white dominant power structures. When LIS as a field discusses its “diversity problem”, it is careful to avoid race or critiquing the profession and its institutions. In fact, as Schlesselman-Tarango (2016) notes, we conceptualize diversity as a racial difference with whiteness being the norm (p. 669). When gathering information workers at conferences, whiteness continues to pervade, leaving many POC information workers without recourse or community.

With whiteness being both invisible and the norm at LIS conferences, opportunities for authentic conversations about POC experiences remain elusive. A review of the history of ethnic professional associations within ALA shows that these groups were formed out of the racial segregation of Black, Asian and Latinx librarians from white conferences spaces (Echavarria & Wertheimer, 1997). Even when they were invited into larger, professional spaces, they found the unique needs of their own groups ignored or marginalized. Hathcock (2016) articulates the need for a space where POC community building is emphasized and justification for its value is not questioned by the dominant power. While the ethnic ALA caucuses and other groups are important partners in the lives of BIPOC workers, many of these groups are dedicated to the promotion of user services and programming. There are few conferences that are dedicated to addressing the personal and professional needs of BIPOC workers and even fewer that occur at the intersection between public, private, and school libraries and their diverse staff.

Counterspaces

One solution to POC lacking authentic dialogue on whiteness is the development of counterspaces or safe spaces to support and mentor other information workers of color. Often unaffiliated with professional associations and ethnic caucuses, Solorzano et al. (2000) developed the notion of counterspaces “as sites where deficit notions of people of color can be challenged and where a positive collegiate racial climate can be established

and maintained” (p. 70). Furthermore, counterspaces are “sites of radical possibility” that ensure patterns of oppression are not reproduced in the setting (Case & Hunter, 2012, p. 70).

Academic counterspaces are especially important for scholars of color because the space allows attendees to foster their own transformative learning and envelops them in an environment, “wherein their experiences are validated and viewed as important knowledge” (Solorzano et al., 2000, p. 70). Case and Hunter state counterspaces challenge deficit notions through narrative identity work, acts of resistance, and direct relational transactions including self-enhancement (2012). Anantachai et al. (2016) argue supportive networks and mentorship are key components of retaining librarians of color in academia. Because counterspaces are dynamic, they provide a space from which to consistently challenge, grow, and transform ourselves in the process of building community with others (Morales, 2017).

2018 People of Color in Library and Information Science Summit

Planning the First Summit in 2018

Starting in 2017, within the walls of the William H. Hannon Library at Loyola Marymount University (LMU), we decided to produce our own counterspace. As coworkers and friends, we sought and found solidarity, humor, and a sense of peace in our own company, often collaborating and attending LIS events together to further our professional goals. Seeking to advance conversations about oppression in LIS that occurred during Slack channels at work, we attended *Pushing the Margins: Women of Color and Intersectionality in LIS Symposium* at UCLA in 2017. This symposium highlighted POC who contributed to the Litwin Press volume of that same name that explored “the experiences of women of color in library and information science rooted in black feminism, critical race theory, and intersectionality” (Joint Council of Librarians of Color (JCLC), 2018). While a book talk is not unique to LIS, the symposium’s content and, most importantly, the prioritization of BIPOC voices was groundbreaking and informative to us. For inspiration, we also looked to the JCLC occurring in September 2018 that same year. JCLC, the joint conference hosted by ALA ethnic affiliates only takes place every four to five years. For many librarians of color, JCLC is the only time BIPOC information workers are not considered the minority in the space; it is a visible reminder of the possibility of a LIS without the specter of white supremacy. With this in mind, we met in October 2017 and envisioned an event in which attendees could workshop their research ideas, practice their presentations prior to JCLC, and foster personal, professional, and mentoring relationships. It is

from these conversations that the theme, *Empowering Collaborations and Creating Brave Spaces*, was born.

Following the lead of the predominantly female *Pushing the Margins* symposium, we initially proposed a localized, women-only event. However, considering that LIS is already a female-dominated field, we decided that inviting all information workers of color would lend itself to more community-building opportunities. The organizers settled on the word “summit” to describe an empowered meeting where everyone is an equal and active participant depending on their needs. We reflected on our inspiration, *Pushing the Margins*, and concluded that because librarians of color were sharing space with white librarians, the symposium became a space for librarians of color to share trauma or to justify their presence for white librarians to recognize their humanity. From this experience, we understood that our summit was not an ideal place for white people or their allyship work. We decided this summit was strictly “our time”.

Knowing that the summit would need to strike a different tone to address the importance of POC-only counterspaces, we spent several organizer meetings just drafting the mission. We knew it had to guide the difficult conversations, relationship building across LIS and external to academia, the building and retention of skills, and the expansion of professional research as we knew it. We recognized that any event held on occupied white, capitalist lands could not be inherently “safe” for BIPOC. Instead, we wanted to invite attendees to be “brave” at the summit and engage with their own identities and internalized feelings in these spaces.

In addition to creating a POC-only space, and in order to gain the institutional monetary support needed to host the summit, we considered how the summit would support research activity. Presenting at conferences is an important part of librarianship; however, there are many barriers for POC to attend and present at conferences including cost, time off, and travel. With this in mind, we solicited funding for our home institution (LMU) for full conference funding.

As academic librarians who attended the white-dominated conferences in LIS, we wanted to prioritize creating a supportive and inviting environment for all attendees. Conferences can be intimidating, especially if one does not have a peer to teach them how to navigate the space and conference processes. To counter the intimidation of the proposal process, we specifically reached out to graduate programs and mentorship programs to encourage new and non-academic librarians to share their work and experiences in any mode possible (POC in LIS, 2017). We texted, called, and emailed folks who expressed nervousness about their knowledge and skill. Lastly, we noted that library research about POC experiences, self-care, and wellness had historically been discouraged at professional association conferences. It was our intention to allow folks to expand upon and research those topics that are key to their livelihood, even if they were deemed unacceptable for inclusion in other LIS spaces.

Topics and Impact of the 2018 POC in LIS Summit

The summit welcomed 78 information workers representing over 40 institutions from 5 different states to LMU's campus. While the majority of attendees were from academic institutions, there was representation from public libraries and schools (see [Figure 2.1](#)). Additionally, the summit highlighted three first-time keynote speakers and seven first-time presenters among a variety of presenters from various LIS areas (see [Figure 2.2](#)). After participating in the summit, several presenters collaborated and presented research at larger LIS conferences, including the Association of College and Research Libraries Conference and JCLC, just as we intended.

The summit theme, *Empowering Collaborations and Creating Brave Spaces*, inspired topics from self-care to research interests and peer support systems (see [Figure 2.3](#)). 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 action. Their keynote, *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

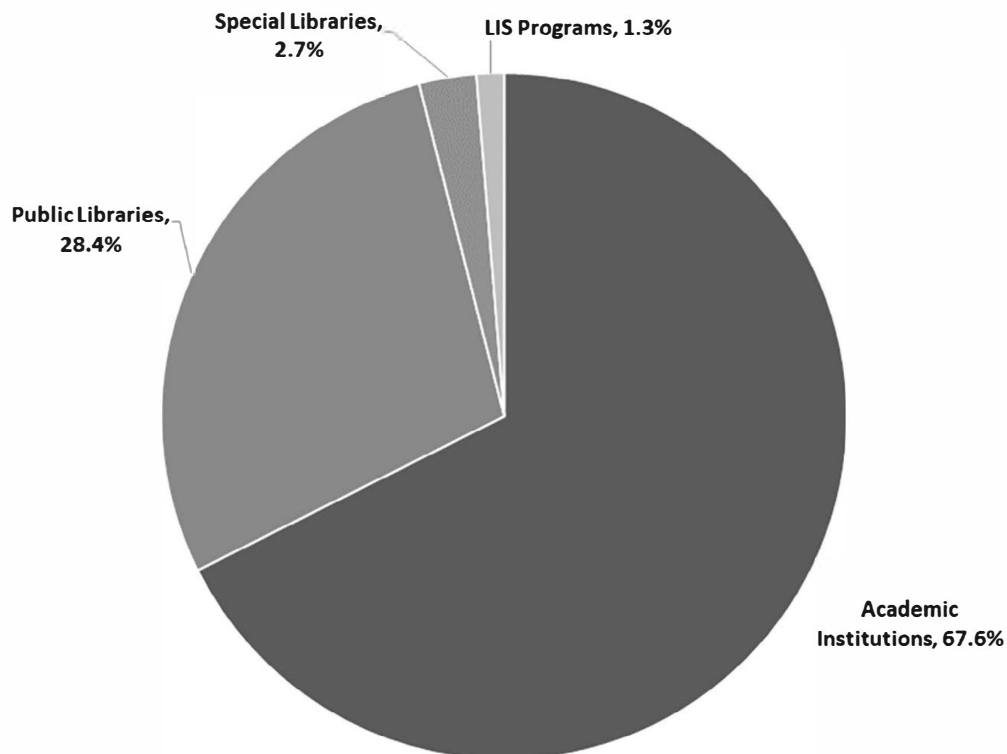


Figure 2.1 POC in LIS 2018 Summit Attendees by Institution Pie Chart

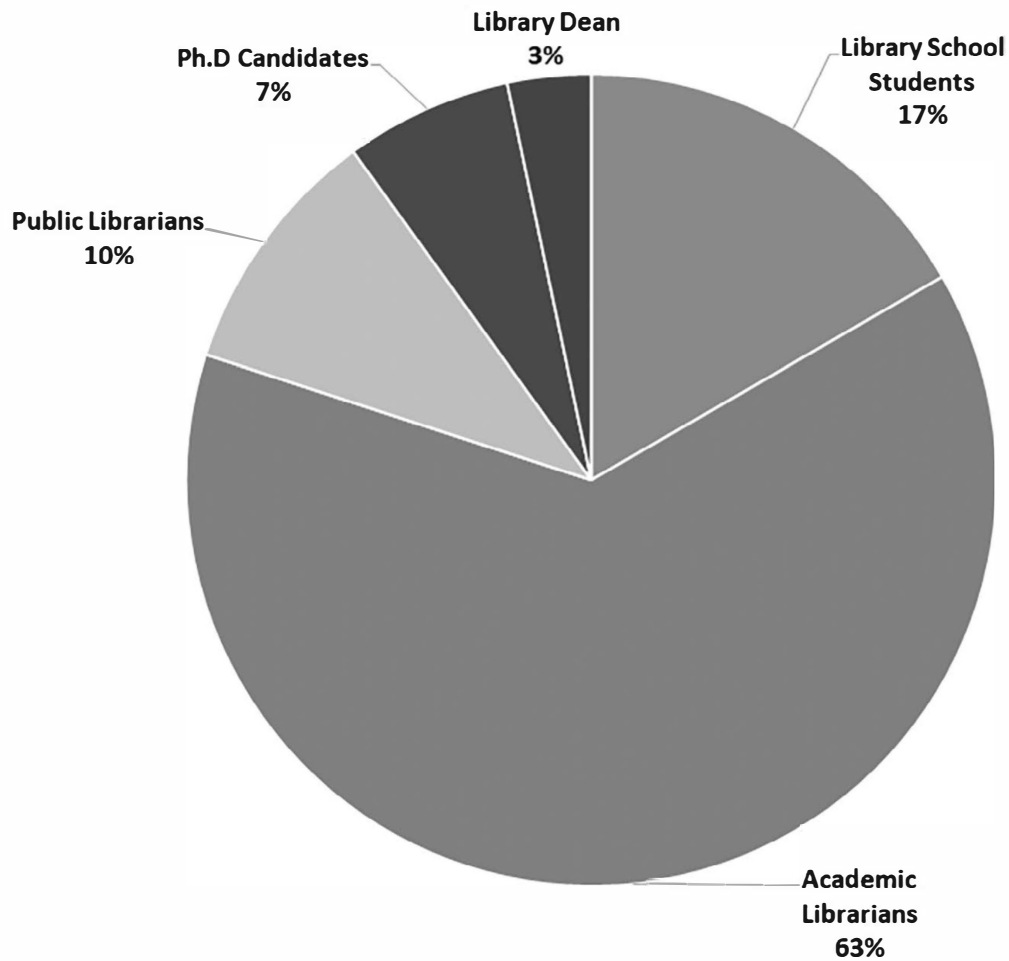


Figure 2.2 POC in LIS 2018 Summit Presenters by Profession Pie Chart

sayings, images, and thoughts to be stitched together and continued at the JCLC a few months later.

According to the summit’s feedback survey, attendees listed personal growth & development, content, and networking as the top three reasons for attending the summit. When asked what they took away from POC in LIS Summit, the attendees stated they learned a new skill, learned about self-care, and created a network for personal and professional colleagues (see [Table 2.4](#)). Notably, the summit created space for information workers in diverse institutions and role types, often siloed at other conferences, to foster collaborations and share their experiences in LIS (Blas et al., 2019).

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 covered a range of topics:

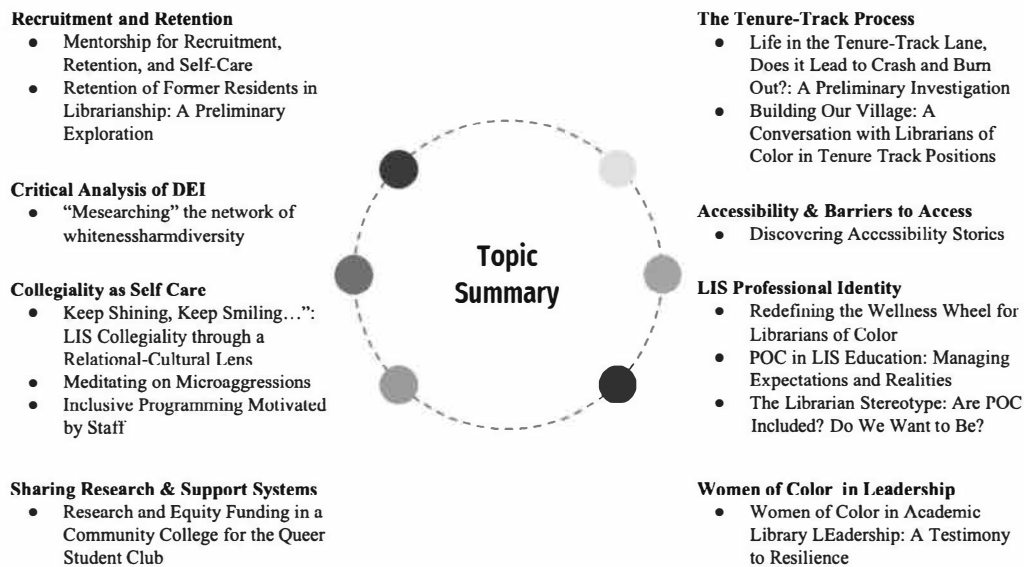


Figure 2.3 2018 Summit Presentations by Topical Track Listing

Note: Reproduced from the 2018 POC in LIS Impact Report, https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1100&context=librarian_pubs

Table 2.4 Summit Attendee Feedback Survey Results: Did You Do Any of the Following Bar Chart. Reprinted from the 2018 Impact Report.

Goal 1	Goal 2	Goal 3	Goal 4
Create a collaborative and brave space for developing collaborations and research	Provide practical professional development skills and strategies for information workers	Highlight the voices and perspectives of emerging professionals in the field such as students, non-academic librarians, staff, etc.	Highlight critical analysis of diversity and inclusion in services and collections
Objective: 50% of attendees will find collaborators for a future project	Objective: 75% of attendees will learn or practice a new skill	Objective: 10% of attendees will self-identify as one of the professional categories	Objective: Increase in number of proposals on diversity and inclusion

Note: Reproduced from the 2018 POC in LIS Impact Report, https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1100&context=librarian_pubs

Identity Work at POC in LIS Summit

Identity work is the process by which individuals or collectives give meaning to themselves and others through narratives, which brings upon healing and restoration to marginalized groups (Case & Hunter, 2012). Several presenters shared narratives that validated the experiences of info workers of color to promote healing and restoration. For example, in *Mesearching: the network of whitenessharmdiversity*, 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 (2018). Through their experience on diversity committees in LIS, Gabiola characterizes the power dynamics that stunt the possibilities of an anti-oppressive learning environment. In particular, Gabiola argued that diversity research was a panopticon to surveil POC, and diversity initiatives were institutional devices to control POC and protect whiteness. Their presentation was rated the second-highest rated session at the summit; tapping into the shared frustration over diversity committees and initiatives within libraries.

Resistance Narratives at POC in LIS Summit

The summit also provided space for resistance narratives which articulate the strength and capability of setting members to overcome and resist oppression (Case & Hunter, 2012). *Redefining the Wellness Wheel for Librarians of Color*, presented by Amanda Leftwich, defined the dimensions of wellness, barriers faced by POC in the workplace, and made recommendations for wellness in information practice (2018). This presentation was the first time Leftwich introduced this methodology to the field, which would later become a popular topic in LIS self-care practice.

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 Librarians of Color Daily Experiences* (Pun et al., 2018) and *Building Our Village: A Conversation with Librarians of Color in Tenure Track Positions* (Perera et al., 2018). The panelists of both sessions provided attendees with strategies for finding support, time, and mentors in the tenure process. Their frank discussions and answers allowed audience questions to finally find clarity with the oppressive and depressing academic processes we are required to endure.

The POC in LIS Summit as a counterspace provided information workers of color the opportunity to “think, feel and act in ways that are consonant with their own identities but that are typically devalued by the larger society” (Case & Hunter, 2012, p. 265). The summit provided social support through empathy, a shared sense of security, and less isolation (Case & Hunter, 2012). As one attendee wrote in their feedback survey, “... The funny thing is I attended to see how I could help contribute to this community; but you ended up helping me instead. I cannot say

enough about my experiences here. Thank you for giving me the perspective I really needed, that I wasn't going to get anywhere else" (Conner-Gaten et al., 2018).

2020 People of Color in Library and Information Science Summit

Initial Plans for the 2020 POC in LIS Summit

Fueled by the positive feedback and impact, we were compelled to host another summit and decided on July 24, 2020. We considered the sustainability of the summit, particularly the importance of the low cost for presenters and attendees. In October 2019, the official planning for the 2020 POC in LIS Summit began including fundraising efforts to ensure financial stability. We brainstormed fundraising models and applied for and received funding from the Statewide California Electronic Library Consortium (SCELC) Project Initiatives Fund (SPIF) grant. Continuing our focus on community and how collaborations strengthen our own identities, we developed the 2020 Summit theme *Thriving Together: Strengthening Our Identities through Community*. We urged attendees to explore a specific thought question: *How can POC in LIS thrive together to create strong, diverse, and beautiful communities?* Following our experience as organizers in 2018 and due to our SPIF grant, we developed summit goals and objectives, with metrics to assess the impact of the event (see [Figure 2.5](#)).

Duplicating much of the planning used for the successful first summit, we developed an abridged timeline to ensure the success of the second summit (see [Figure 2.6](#)).

Addressing COVID-19 and Moving Online

Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the planning of the 2020 POC at the LIS Summit. Given the severity of the pandemic and remote

Did you do any of the following at the POC in LIS Summit?

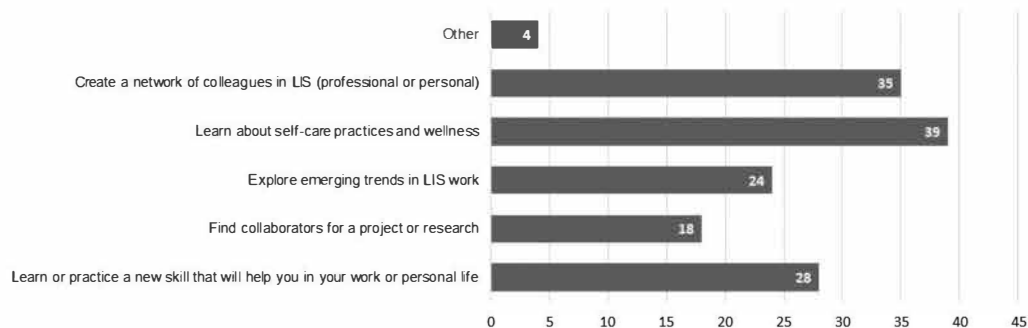


Figure 2.4 The 2020 POC in LIS Summit Four Goals and Outcomes

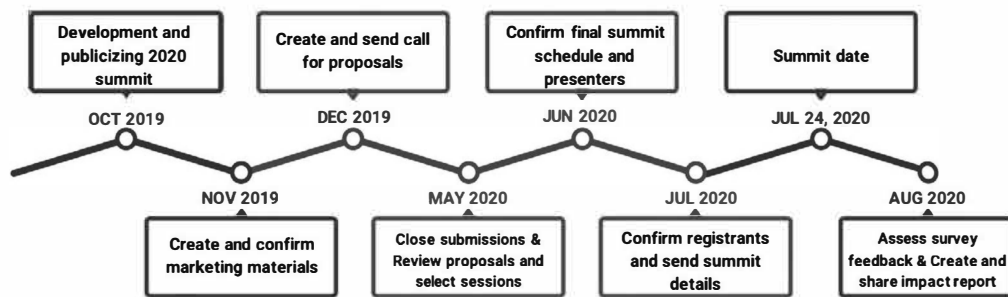


Figure 2.6 2020 Summit Timeline from October 2019 to August 2020

work requirements in early spring 2020, we decided to postpone the summit indefinitely. While this was a difficult decision, we wanted to retain the community-building spirit that was so valued by our attendees in 2018. As we began to grapple with the physical and psychological impact of COVID-19, we felt that there might be a need for the summit as a space for healing, grieving, and reflection. With that, an in-person summit was tentatively rescheduled for July 2021.

However, as the pandemic continued, we were forced to consider moving online or canceling altogether. There were benefits to an online summit as it would allow for more attendees unrestricted by the physical library space and invite global participation while maintaining free registration. Costs were also significantly lower with an online format. We could not dismiss the reduction of community building and peer networking that organically occurs in in-person events, as well as Zoom and remote work fatigue, and increasing competition from similar online events. But the benefits for this counterspace outweighed the disadvantages and in November 2020, the 2021 POC in LIS Summit moved online.

The Summit mission, theme, funding, planning, and outreach remained the same with the move online. We were able to also retain our funding which shifted our expenses to technology for presenters and increased presenter honorariums. The conference logistics, such as content, scheduling, and day-of technology needs, were re-evaluated for an online format. We brainstormed the best format to reduce Zoom fatigue and reviewed technologies to facilitate and improve the online experience. Given the importance of brave spaces in our mission, we adjusted the 2018 summit code of conduct including expectations for attendee behavior online during the summit. The code outlines and defines forms of harassment as well the consequences for those who engage in harassing or discriminatory behavior as well as a mechanism for grievance reporting. In the end, we decided not to record the Summit presentations. We knew that recording sessions could hinder open and honest conversations during the summit; which was critical to the success of the inaugural event. We also disabled the ability for attendees to download chat conversations

from Zoom to protect the privacy of the attendees and to encourage open dialogue during the event.

Another key element of the initial summit was that of the POC-only space. We knew that others had achieved this online through rigorous protocol and gatekeeping and reached out for alternatives. To further strengthen this commitment, clear language was added to the attendee and presenter forms: “I understand the mission of POC in LIS Summit is to create a productive and brave space for people of color, especially women and marginalized identities, working in the information sector”. This creates “a social contract” and community agreement among the summit organizers, presenters, and attendees to promote a productive and brave space.

The July 2021 Summit, as we hoped, brought together 124 attendees from 66 institutions online to share and uplift one another during one of the most difficult periods in our lifetime thus far (Blas et al., 2021). Organizers utilized four Zoom online conference rooms to host simultaneous tracks of 75 and 40-minute presentations, 30-minute roundtable discussions held in Zoom breakout rooms, and one, 2-hour optional workshop at the beginning of the conference in place of a keynote. Topics included parenting during the pandemic, the lived experiences of BIPOC administrators and leaders in academic librarianship, mentorships for BIPOC workers, and community archives of POC collections. With a 58% response rate to the satisfaction feedback survey, 98% of participants rated the online summit content as “good” or “very good”, which we took as overwhelming satisfaction. As with most online meetings, we were concerned about screen fatigue and isolation but, with this feedback, it appeared most attendees were able to connect and participate in the counterspace successfully. It is our hope that future summits, whether online or in-person, achieve our mission, given our immense attention to building community, retaining trust, and, most importantly, providing a POC-only counterspace for all of our colleagues.

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