

PREPARING FOR A MORE EQUITABLE FUTURE:

An Examination Of EDI-Focused Courses In LIS Curricula

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years many professions, including the field of librarianship, have seen a much-needed increase in their focus on issues related to equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI). For example, in January 2022, ACRL's Board of Directors added a strategic goal area dedicated to EDI. Because Library and Information Science (LIS) education lays a foundation for and greatly impacts librarians' professional identity and practice, it is important to understand how they approach EDI issues in their courses. The current exploratory study aims to survey how LIS programs incorporate EDI into their curricula by examining the language used in online course descriptions. Course descriptions are often the first contact prospective and new students have with a school's curriculum and also serve to broadcast what a program values and what its curricular priorities are. This study examines the EDI foci across ALA-accredited library science programs by analyzing their online, publicly available course descriptions' use of EDI terminology. Emergent themes uncovered are discussed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The first postsecondary library school was established by Dewey in 1886 at Columbia College and offered library economy courses with an emphasis on "applied workability and scientific knowledge."¹ In 1923 Williamson's report advocated for the separation of the library clerical and professional tasks and graduate education for those performing professional library tasks, leading to the establishment of the first Graduate Library School funded by the Carnegie Corporation and opened in 1926 at the University of Chicago.² Since the degree program's inception, there have been many changes to the curriculum over the years to reflect changes in technology, culture, and job needs.³ Some of these curricular changes have been enacted specifically to reflect changing demographics or to promote more equitable treatment for historically underserved populations.⁴ Underscoring the importance of curricular changes that support future librarians, several studies have shown the potential follow-on effects of curricula that do not promote EDI topics, such as Alajmi & Alshammari who found that "numerous newly qualified librarians are ill-prepared to work in diverse neighborhoods, and those who work as librarians do not constitute a diverse group."⁵

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In addition to more appropriately preparing future librarians for the communities they will serve, changes to the LIS curriculum can also serve to attract and retain more diverse students. For example, a study of the attractiveness of LIS programs to students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds found that students from diverse backgrounds had “overwhelmingly negative” perceptions of the programs, even though the authors designed their survey to collect both positive and negative feedback.⁶ The survey participants in the study noted issues such as: “the lack of international content and the disconnect between the immigrants and the locals and the lack of multicultural representation in course materials, the student body and the faculty contingent.”⁷

In order to understand the scope of this issue, it is important for librarianship to have a full accounting of how EDI is currently reflected in LIS curricula. One approach to building this environmental scan is quantifying EDI-related courses at ALA-accredited colleges and universities.⁸ For example, an audit of 108-course syllabi at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign found that 50 (46%) “were deemed inadequate in regards to containing diverse content”⁹, 32% contained diversity content, and 21% contained some such content.¹⁰ A 2011 study of the courses offered at iSchools in the US indicated that out of hundreds of courses offered across the iSchools, only 66 course descriptions contained diversity-related terminology.¹¹ Further analysis of the 66 courses indicates that only 6.4% of those courses were required.¹² Over time there have been positive developments in the curriculum. For example, in 2013 Al-Qallaf & Mika found that out of 58 ALA-accredited graduate LIS programs, forty-seven (81 percent) offered at least one course dealing with diverse and/or multicultural populations, and noted that the number was significantly higher than the previous year in which only twenty-two programs offered such courses.¹³ However, the researchers noted that all 146 courses identified in the 2013 study were offered as electives and highlighted the importance of having core courses focused on multiculturalism and diversity.¹⁴ In addition to an increase in EDI-focused courses, some graduate programs added EDI concentrations and tracks, as evidenced in the Association for Library and Information Science Education’s (ALISE) 2022 Statistical Report which reported on ALA-accredited degree concentrations such as Critical Librarianship; Information Equity, Diverse Communities; Indigenous Information Management; and Social Justice.¹⁵ While there have been some improvements in the area of integration of EDI courses into LIS programs, researchers highlight the necessity for regular examination of the LIS curricula “to ensure that they correspond to and reflect societal changes regarding diversity.”¹⁶

METHODS

In the current study researchers utilized the directory of ALA-accredited programs in library and information studies¹⁷ to identify all of the MLS granting institutions in the United States, Canada, and Puerto Rico. Based on this list, researchers investigated whether each accredited program’s course descriptions were publicly available online. Of the 64 schools, researchers were able to find online course descriptions for all but two programs. The three members of the research team divided the list of 62 schools with publicly available course descriptions into groups of 20-22 graduate programs each and examined the course descriptions for evidence of the use of diversity terminology.

In this survey of EDI terminology in course descriptions, the concepts of equity, diversity, and inclusion are in large part reflective of ALA’s Office for Diversity, Literacy, and Outreach Services Special Needs & Under-served Population outreach areas.¹⁸ These areas include:

- Adult New and Non-Readers
- Bookmobile Communities
- Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender People
- Incarcerated People and Ex-Offenders
- Older Adults
- People of Color
- People with Disabilities
- Poor and Homeless People
- Rural, Native, and Tribal Libraries of All Kinds
- Spanish Outreach

This list is not exhaustive in regards to the diverse audiences served by librarians, nor entirely reflective of the wider range of EDI-related courses offered in LIS programs today, therefore additional terms and concepts were included by researchers in their survey of courses. Before reviewing the course descriptions, researchers identified terms that would indicate a potential EDI curricular focus. This initial list included terms such as: divers*; equit*; inclus*; ethn*; BIPOC; cultur*; underrepresent*; multi-cult*; indig*; non-dominant, etc. (* signifying truncation of search terms). However, due to not all catalogs being displayed as a single webpage (e.g., pop-outs for individual courses rather than one continuous searchable page) and out of caution that additional EDI terms might be missed, researchers decided to manually read all of the course descriptions. This allowed researchers to identify courses with the above-listed terms as well as any additional courses that contained other EDI terminology or addressed EDI in some way. The context in which the EDI terms were found was important to distinguish whether some course descriptions reflected an EDI focus or not, such as in the distinction between the use of the term “cultural” in the context of “meeting the cultural needs of children” as opposed to “cultural stereotypes and issues surrounding cultural authenticity in children’s/youth services.” For any course where the use of these EDI terms was deemed ambiguous or not clearly EDI related at first glance, the entire research team met to discuss whether or not it should be included in the dataset.

In addition to compiling all course descriptions that included EDI terminology, researchers included course names and numbers in their database and assessed whether courses with EDI terminology were core or elective for their programs. Researchers also classified courses into the following academic focus categories: academic libraries, administration, archives/museum studies/special collections, cataloging, children’s/youth services, collection development, digital libraries/information technology, diversity, ethics, health, information behavior, instruction, introduction, literacy, policy, public libraries, reference, school media, service learning/community engagement, and storytelling. The category “diversity” refers to courses that have a very strong focus on diversity topics as they relate to library services and do not focus heavily on specific aspects of library work (e.g. “Progressive and Radical Information Work—Bringing together issues of social justice and librarianship throughout the graduate program, this course focuses on the role of libraries and information professionals in resisting or reinforcing unequal and unjust balances of power in society...”). “Introduction” refers to foundational courses that explicate what library services and work are (e.g. “Information and Knowledge Professions—History, roles and scope of the information and knowledge professions. Basic concepts and issues including impact of information technology on the individual, intellectual freedom, privacy and diversity...”).

LIMITATIONS

As an exploratory study looking only at course descriptions, this project has several limitations. For example, course descriptions varied greatly in the amount of detail included across institutions, with some offering lengthy paragraphs and sometimes course learning outcomes, while others were limited to one or two sentences. It is reasonable to assume that lengthy descriptions are more likely to mention EDI terminology than their brief counterparts. Furthermore, the absence of EDI terminology in a course description does not mean that the syllabus and course content do not address EDI. Neither does the presence of an EDI-related term(s) guarantee a strong EDI focus of the course. Some diversity-related courses might be new or experimental pilot courses that do not have an official status or course description listed and published.¹⁹ The course listing and descriptions examined reflected courses taught between 2020-2022, which excluded potential new diversity courses that might be offered this semester (Spring 2023).

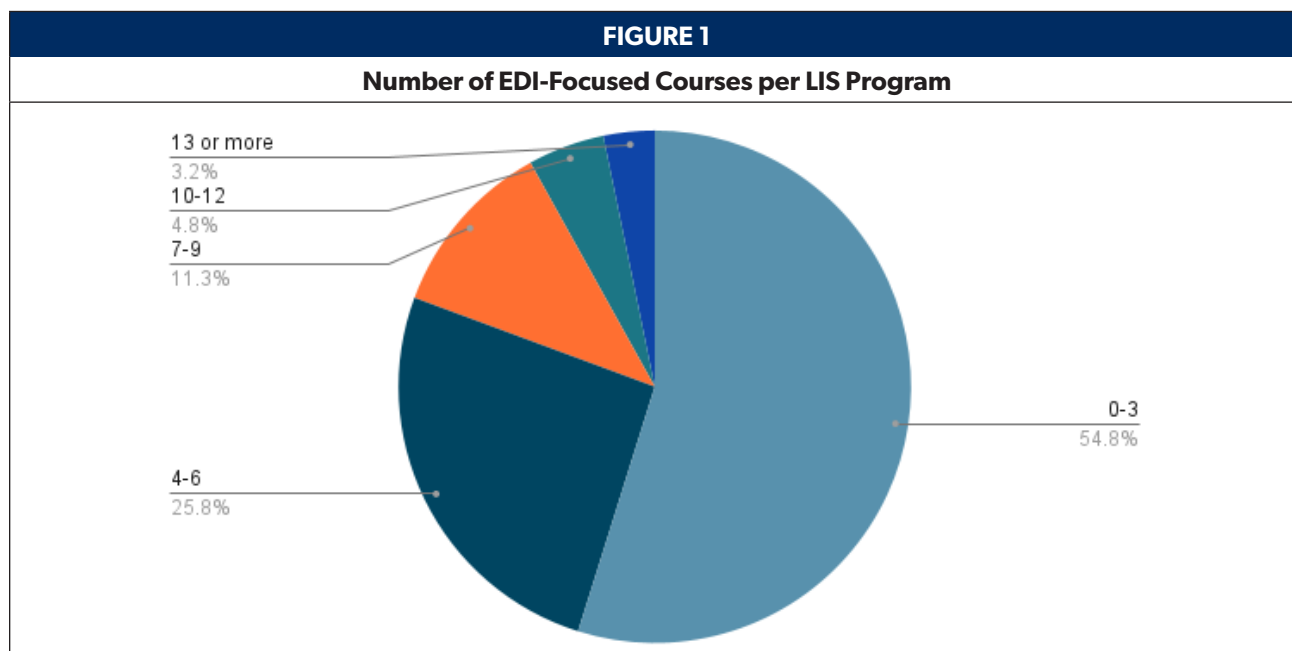
RESULTS

Results of the survey of EDI courses are broken into two general categories of findings—**Characteristics of Schools and Programs** and **Characteristics of Courses and Course Descriptions**.

Characteristics of Schools and Programs

When looking at course listings, researchers documented the total number of courses offered in each academic program, as well as each program’s count of EDI courses. The combined total number of course descriptions examined across institutions was 3881. 250 of those course descriptions included EDI terminology, accounting for approximately 6.4% of the total offerings. Of the 250 courses containing EDI terminology, 90.8% (227) were elective courses, and 9.2% (23) were required core courses.

When looking at the distribution of EDI courses across the 64 programs surveyed, the number of courses with descriptions containing EDI terminology varied widely, ranging from 0-27 per program (see Figure 1). While close to 20% (19.3%) of the programs had 7 or more EDI-focused courses, more than half (54.8%) of the programs had 0-3 course descriptions that featured EDI-related terminology.



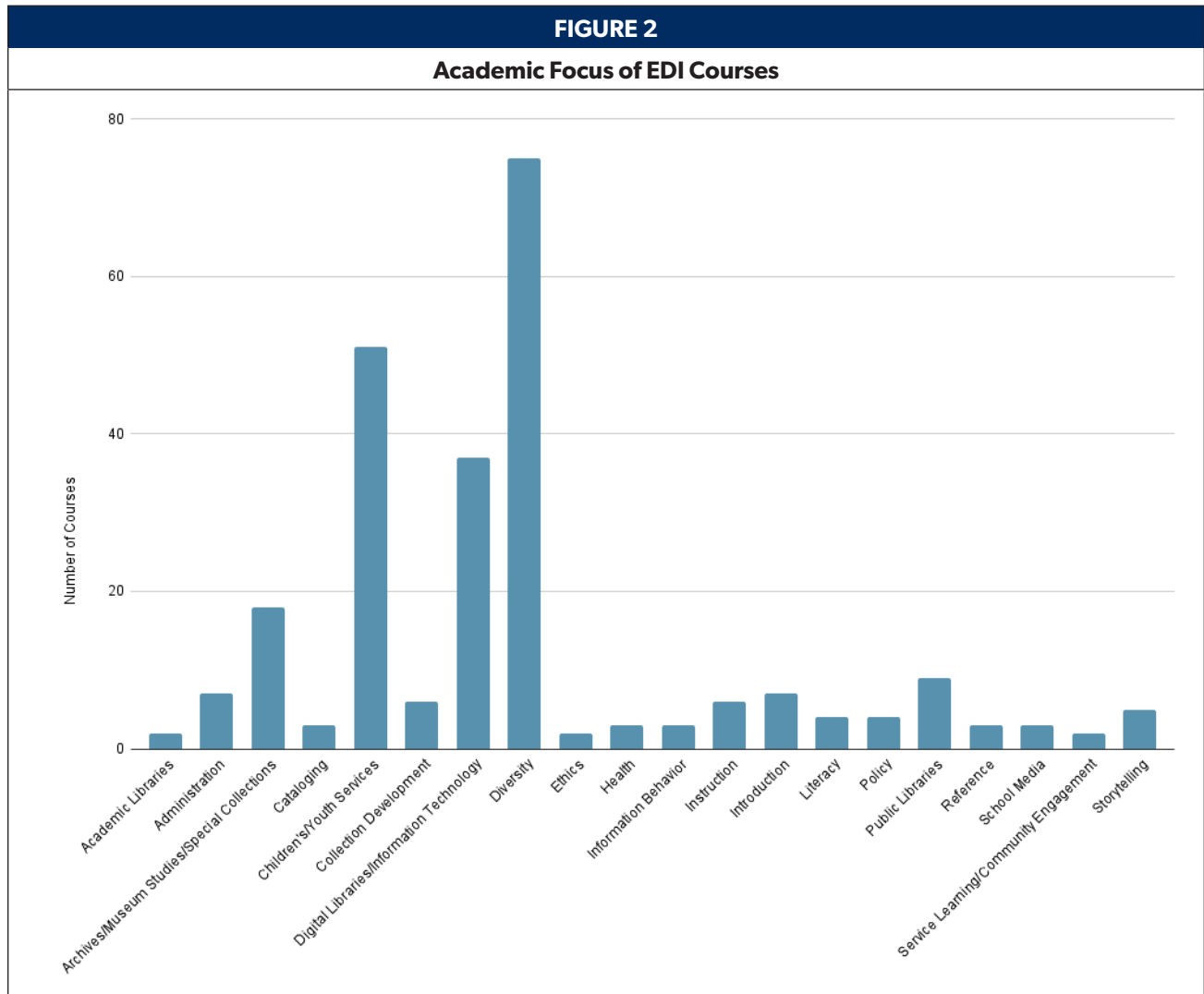
The locations of the 64 academic programs were evaluated by researchers and assigned to one of 6 groups using the U.S. Census’s “Regions and Divisions of the United States”²⁰ with Canadian programs being assigned to a “Canada” region. Analysis of this location data found that the distribution of LIS programs across these regions does not correspond with the distribution of EDI-focused courses across the regions. For example, while Canadian programs only accounted for 12.93% of the total number of ALA-accredited programs examined, courses delivered by Canadian programs accounted for 23.8% of the EDI courses identified (see Table 1).

TABLE 1
Distribution of LIS Programs across 6 Regions

Region	Percentage of LIS Programs	Percentage of EDI Courses
Canada	12.9%	23.8%
Midwest	22.6%	23.6%
Northeast	21.0%	16.9%
Pacific	1.6%	2.8%
South	32.3%	21.0%
West	9.7%	12.9%

Characteristics of Courses and Course Descriptions

To get a sense of the types of courses represented among the 250 EDI-focused courses, researchers assigned each course one of 20 academic focus categories (outlined in **Methods**) that describe the main professional or disciplinary focus of the courses. While a wide variety of course description foci was identified, diversity (n=75), children’s/youth services (n=51), and digital libraries/information technology (n=37) represented the categories with the highest percentage of courses (see Figure 2).

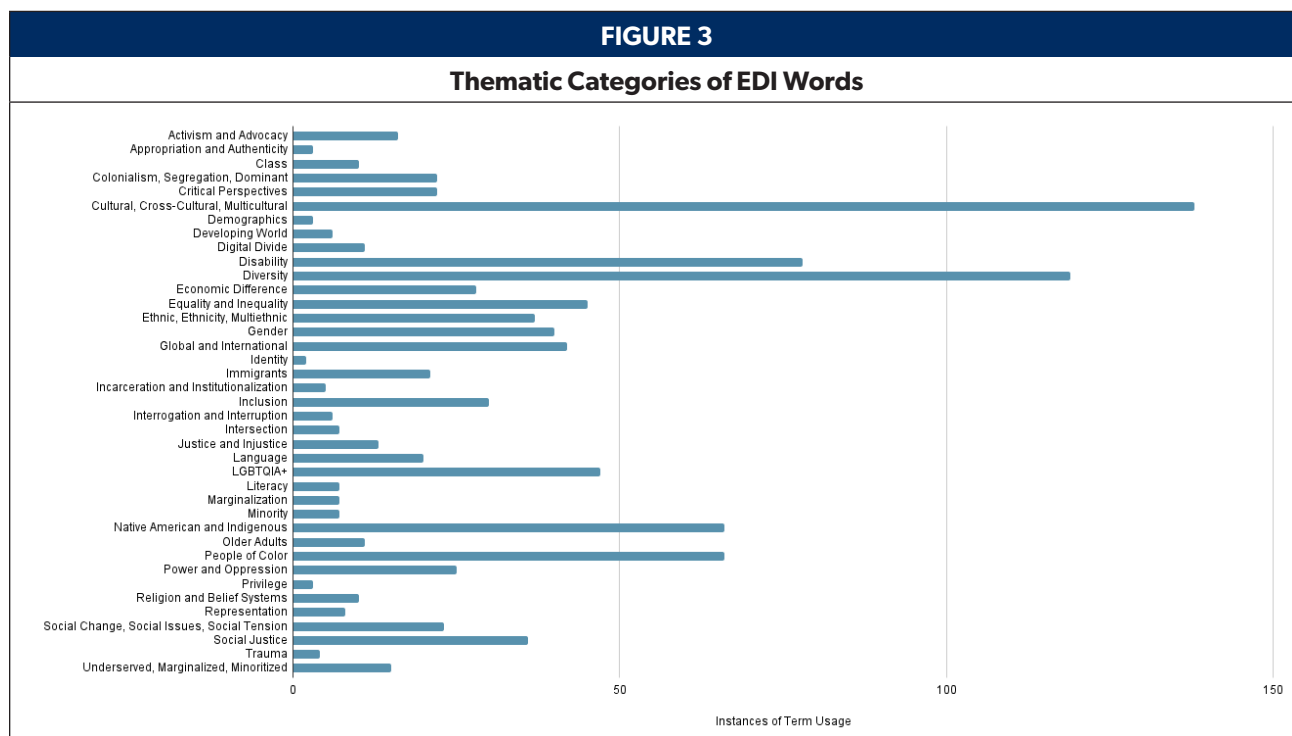


The depth of EDI content in the course descriptions varied greatly in the 250 courses identified, ranging from brief mentions of diversity, multiculturalism, and services to diverse communities to fully dedicated EDI-focused course descriptions on critical librarianship. Examples of course descriptions that included brief mentions of EDI were:

- Information Sources and Services course provides “experience in evaluation and use of bibliographic materials, reference interviewing, and search techniques, in finding answers to real-world questions reflecting the multidisciplinary and multicultural interests and characteristics of library users.”
- Leadership in Academic Libraries examines “professional values-- customer focus, continual learning, diversity”
- Literacy for K-12 Librarians in which readings include “multicultural characters and settings.”

- Examples of fully EDI-focused courses included:
- Social Justice and Children’s Young Adult Literature, which teaches students to “select, evaluate and analyze social justice and injustice in children’s & young adult literature and includes discussions of power, racism, diversity, violence...”;
- Privilege and Equity offers “exploration of various societal privileges and how they affect equity in library, archives, and other information professions.... The topics of race, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, and education will be considered”;
- Decentering Whiteness in Library examines “the social construction of whiteness in the United States and develop students’ approach to decentering whiteness in library and information science...”;
- Academic Librarianship looks at contemporary academic librarianship issues using “the lens of social justice and equity.”

In addition to a variety of academic foci represented among the EDI courses, there was also a wide variety of terms and phrases used to signify an EDI focus within the course descriptions. There were 1085 EDI terms and phrases documented within the 250 courses. Some course descriptions included only one or two words or phrases related to diversity, while some had as many as 27. Researchers grouped these 1085 terms into 39 thematic categories. These categories were a combination of stand-alone concepts such as “Race” as well as combined categories of thematically close terms such as “Underserved and Marginalized” and “Power and Oppression.” The category with the largest number of EDI terms was “Cultural, Cross-Cultural, Multicultural” (n=138). The next highest categories were “Diversity” (n=120), “Disability” (n=78), and “Race” (n=66) and “Native American and Indigenous” (n=66) (see Figure 3).



DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The primary reasons for EDI integration in LIS education are changing demographics, increased awareness of social justice issues, and the need for cultural competence in the profession.²¹ The US population is diversifying, and by 2050, the United States is projected to become a “minority-majority” country.²² Meanwhile, the library profession remains exceedingly white; according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the demographics of the library profession are 86% white; 4.3 % Black/African American; 5.1 Asian, and 8% Hispanic/Latino.²³ In addi-

tion to the need to diversify the profession to reflect the demographics of the people they serve, librarians must “prepare students to challenge structural inequality and foreground justice-oriented professional practice.”²⁴ Already, job postings often require or prefer experience working with diverse constituents, while many new graduates do not feel prepared to work in diverse neighborhoods.²⁵ Increasing EDI coverage in the LIS curriculum and including EDI terminology in course descriptions is likely to not only better prepare LIS students for future careers but might also help to attract and retain a more diverse pool of students.

While progress has been made in the quantity and quality of EDI-focused courses in LIS curricula, there is clearly room for additional improvements. The current survey of course descriptions across 62 ALA-accredited LIS programs indicates broad programmatic engagement with EDI content and increased inclusion of EDI across the LIS curricula. Almost every ALA-accredited LIS program had at least one course that included EDI content, though over half of the programs (54%) offered three or fewer EDI-focused courses. In a 2013 study of multiculturalism and diversity in LIS education none of the courses with EDI-focused course descriptions were core requirements,²⁶ whereas in the present study, over 20 of the EDI-focused courses were required courses (9.3% of EDI courses surveyed). One possible pathway for EDI to become a more central part of the profession is for EDI content to be built into the structure of LIS programs and in particular become a part of the core courses and degree requirements.²⁷ Jaeger et al. expounded on this pathway in their suggestion that focusing on equity, diversity, and inclusion in the LIS curriculum creates a “virtuous circle” that reverberates through the LIS field and increases representation, recruitment, and service quality to diverse communities.²⁸ They argued that “inclusive education would promote the inclusive practice, which, in turn, would promote a greater diversity of people drawn to join the profession.”²⁹ An example of this pathway at work can be found in the iSchool at the University of Maryland (UMD), which saw an increase in students from historically marginalized backgrounds, which some faculty have said was not attributed to any strategic diversity recruitment effort. Rather, the increase was linked directly to the development of a degree specialization in information and diverse populations within their graduate degree program.³⁰ The authors of that 2015 study concluded that students from underserved and nondominant backgrounds gravitated toward institutions where “they see themselves and their lived experiences embodied in the curriculum.”³¹

In light of the current research’s findings and previous research on EDI-focused LIS curriculum, LIS programs are encouraged to continue building on their progress and offer more courses that thoughtfully prepare future librarians to meet the needs of all library users. The study and critique of EDI in LIS curricula should be an ongoing process, and integration of EDI into LIS education should be deliberate and extensive, encompassing all areas of LIS work. Further study of EDI integration into LIS coursework, particularly research on the coverage of specific EDI concepts, such as antiracism, serving LGBTQIA+ populations, and indigenous knowledge across the LIS curriculum, would help the profession to evolve into a more user-focused discipline.

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