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## Library Response to Black Liberation Collective: A Review of Student Calls for Change and Implications for Anti-racist Initiatives in Academic Libraries

LuMarie Guth

*Western Michigan University*, lumarie.guth@wmich.edu

Amy Bocko

*Western Michigan University*, amy.bocko@wmich.edu

Micha Broadnax

*Mount Holyoke College*, mbroadna@mtholyoke.edu

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## **Abstract**

This article examines seven case studies concerning college libraries addressing demands collated by the Black Liberation Collective in 2015. Six years out from the publication of the lists, we evaluate statements issued by the libraries and posted on their websites, the promises that have been made to address inequities, and the ensuing actions the libraries have taken to create a welcoming, inclusive community. In solidarity with the protests' student activists at universities across the United States and Canada organized into the Black Liberation Collective and held the first #StudentBlackoutOut day of protests on university campuses on November 15 followed by the publication of lists of demands to over 80 colleges in 28 states, the District of Columbia, and Canada in the hopes of creating more-equitable and inclusive institutions. Seven academic libraries in particular were included with demands to better serve the Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) community. Through this investigation, we examine the responses from these libraries and recommend best practices for evolving academic libraries to serve BIPOC students.

## **Introduction**

On July 13, 2020 fourteen student groups at Western Michigan University sent a letter titled, "A Collective Demand for Action: Statement in Support of Black Lives Matter" to campus administration/media outlets with demands for change including, among others: cross-departmental systemic racism course, increased bias training, systematic reviews of campus policing, annual audits/benchmarks for diversity among campus faculty and staff, inclusion of additional voluntary demographic data on student evaluations, and budget prioritization for social justice initiatives (Counseling Psychology Registered Student Organization and Sociology Graduate Student Association, 2020). The library was not mentioned specifically, although certainly the demands were applicable to this part of the institution. This letter, as well as a national movement to reevaluate policies and practices following the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, led the two Western Michigan University researchers to seek out similar student demands. Interested in understanding the changes students across the country want in their academic libraries, the authors encountered lists of student demands from a variety of higher education institutions compiled by the Black Liberation Collective ("Our Demands," n.d.). At

first review, the two researchers thought this list was compiled in 2020 given the likeness in demands. The third researcher familiar with the national efforts of student leaders in 2015 pointed out that in fact the compiled list of demands were following the national attention to the student organizing at University of Missouri and the summer convening of the Movement for Black Lives in Cleveland Ohio.

Forming in the fall of 2015, “the Black Liberation Collective is dedicated to building infrastructure for black students around the globe to build power, using an intersectional lens, in order to make our campuses safe for all Black students.” Recognizing the importance of introspection and accountability, the authors wanted to review demands and the visibility of library action in the preceding size years. As libraries are currently drafting anti-racism statements, re-evaluating policies, and incorporating anti-racism into their strategic plans, it is valuable to look back at action taken by institutions impacted by the 2015 efforts to examine responses to demands for change and determine best practices to move academic libraries forward.

#### **Note on Author Positionalities**

This article is written by two White librarians and a Black archivist who have spent the majority of their careers in academic libraries. The White authors acknowledge their investigation into student activism was spurred by the events of Summer 2020 and their familiarity with the current Black Lives Matter movement. While this article is narrowly reviewing the visible actions of academic libraries, we acknowledge that the scholarship and praxis of anti-racism, critical librarianship, and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) have long been frameworks written by Black Indigenous People of Color in the profession. We are thankful for the labor and expertise of our colleague, scholars of color and the work of student activists we have researched to broaden our understanding and participate in the conversation of the history of BIPOC activism in higher education.

#### **Note on Article**

This article is intended to provide reflection on the progress and stagnation related to the national efforts localized by BIPOC students and allies on college campuses in the United States around 2015. In the past year, many libraries and archives released anti-racism statements following the

murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade. As we seek to live to the intentions, ideals, change mentioned in those statements, it is important that we acknowledge that students have labored and, not without risk, shared tangible feedback on ways institutions can be less racist, classist, sexist, xenophobic, queerphobic, and transphobic. The authors of this article acknowledge that we are not reviewing institutions in which we currently or have ever contributed to the labor force. Inherently, there are limitations to our insight about institutional progress, priorities, and efforts. We also recognize that by not turning inwards, we are avoiding risks associated with institutional critiques. We believe that examination of student demands and a review of the status, provides insight that far reaches the applicability and possibility for introspection of singular institutions. Given the likeness of institutional practices and histories rooted in oppression, correlations between the seven colleges in this case study can be applied to most American colleges.

### **Literature Review**

In reviewing the literature, we attempted to capture themes of how academic libraries have considered and incorporated diversity and inclusion efforts aimed at improving students of color experience. We attempted to find scholarship on library responses to student activism. While we found examples of how to create student advocates for the library (Zanoni and Mandernack, 2010; Akers and Summey, 2012) and improve archival collection development of student activism (Hughes-Watkins, 2018; Peet, 2018; J.M. Drake 2016), we only found one article that referenced student demands addressing the library to build on the Asian-American collection resources in the library which resulted in the librarian attending a student listening session and was inspired to update hiring procedures in efforts to hire a librarian of color (Dyson, 1989).

#### **Growth of Enrollment of Students of Color at PWIs and Dedicated Library Services**

The topic of diversity in academic libraries in the United States is wide spanning. The importance can be traced to the increased enrollment of students of color in predominantly White institutions (PWIs) in the 1960s and 1970s due to civil rights victories. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibited racial discrimination for any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance, leading higher education institutions to implement affirmative action in admissions (Civil Rights Act, 1964). Josey (1971) called for PWIs to create library programs for

newly enrolled students of color, encouraging reference librarians to dispel the missionary attitude of working for them, but instead work with them. He also called for recruitment of librarians of color and for professional development for White librarians. Suter found that there is apathy and mistrust to library programs targeting students of color (1972). Student peer services are often highly rated, indicating their acumen in uniquely serving these constituents (Piele, 1982; MacAdam and Nichols, 1989). With confidence, academic librarians should trust and consider the recommendations of students of color. The development of programming and outreach is crucial (Trujillo and Webber, 1991) and could be used as part of efforts to improve retention (Jones-Quartey, 1993). Despite repeated calls for change since the 1960s, systemic racism in libraries remains. One example of this is the persistent failure to recruit, retain, and promote librarians of color at rates consistent with demographic representation. Given the position of influence and power “librarians’ perceptions of need are a critical factor in shaping the library’s services response to multicultural students” (Martin 1994).

#### **Use of the Library and Retention for Students of Color**

The late 1980s showed the first emergence of literature studying the effect of library use on retaining students of color. Usage of the campus undergraduate library is a predictor of retention for Black students (Mallinckrodt and Sedlacek, 1987). Subsequent studies that categorize responses by race have found that students of color (Whitmire, 2003) and African American students (Whitmire, 1999; Herrera, 2016) use the library more than their white counterparts, which demonstrates even more why we should listen to the critiques of these students. For Black undergraduates, popular motivation for using the library was to perform better academically in contrast to a requirement for a class or program (Shoge, 2003). Use of the library for information resources, as a place to study, and seeking aid from the librarian have been positively associated with academic success measures (Shoge, 2003). Evidence supports that positive effects for library experience were higher than those for experiences in the student union, with athletic and recreational facilities, and participation in clubs and organizations (Flowers, 2004). The literature demonstrates that students of color experience at the library is important for their success at academic institutions.

## **Sense of Welcomeness in the Academic Library**

There is an established approach of using College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ) to analyze library experiences (Ory and Braskamp, 1988). Diverging from the CSEQ, Whitmere (2004) analyzed a college student satisfaction survey results and found students of color associated “rating the University response to students’ interests and concerns” as a positive predictor for library ratings while ratings of university diversity efforts were not a significant predictor, which led to the theorization that students of color do not see the “library as a race related space.” Jiao, Onwuegbuzie, and Bostick (2004; 2006) found that African American graduate students experienced lower levels of library anxiety than White graduate students. Stewart, Ju, and Kendrick (2019) surveyed Black undergraduates at PWI’s across the country and found mixed results. While participants felt welcomed in the library overall, use of the resources to access information needs was a positive predictor of welcomeness, whereas the “library as place” was a negative predictor. In the survey Kendrick provides microaggressions of other library users as a factor under library as place and speculates that this is the cause of the low ratings for that category.

The research on welcomeness supports the need to recruit and retain more librarians and library employees of color as well as the need for white librarians to educate themselves. Bonnet and McAlexander (2012) study show Black undergraduates, graduate students, and university employees rank the approachability of Black and Asian librarians higher than White librarians. Elteto, Jackson, and Lim (2008) surveyed college students and found that while African American students used the library more frequently than White students, they used the reference services less. In the comments African American students called out the unwelcoming body language of the library employees at the desk and repeatedly mentioned the lack of racial diversity among library employees. Katopol (2012) found that Black graduate students are often unaware of the more advanced research services librarians could offer in regards to strategy and also that the students were frustrated that the librarian did not understand the background on research topics of racial issues within the field they were subject specialists for. Literature in the area of critical librarianship has been pushing for changes to address problems of systemic racism in the profession. Brook, Ellenwood, and Lazzaro (2015) call for a decentralization of

whiteness in the areas of space, racial diversity among library workers, and reference. Brown, Ferretti, Leung, and Méndez-Brady (2008) name neutrality in the profession as the “root of the problem” and address the damaging effects of vocational awe, coined by Ettahr (2017), and invisible whiteness. Espinal, Sutherland, and Roh (2018) recommend white librarians support librarians and students of color by moving “from microaggressions to microaffections” and “educat[ing] themselves on whiteness” (158-159).

### **A Move Toward Restorative Archives**

Multiple demands in our case group also address the lack of diversity in archives. Caswell (2017) taught a lesson on white supremacy in archives in an LIS archives class and constructed a list with the students of privileges white patrons and employees have in archival spaces. Each privilege was accompanied by actions that could be taken to dismantle racism in archives. Hughes-Watkins scholarship demonstrates restorative archival programs in academic libraries (2018). After assessing holdings, Hughes-Watkins determined a scarcity of student voice which was addressed by collection development and acquisitions of alum of color papers and conducting and oral histories.

### **History of Black Liberation Collective**

After a series of racist incidents at the University of Missouri, students engaged in direct action protests starting in October 2015. The networked possibilities of the internet has led to mobilization and communication across geographies. In addition to on campus protests, boycotts, and hunger strikes, University of Missouri students utilized social media through the hashtag of #ConcernedStudent1950 (VanDelinder, 2015). After national attention and community pressure by the Black student organization and the college’s football team, the president resigned. In solidarity and in recognition of the ways in which their respective institutions failed to create inclusive and safe spaces for BIPOC students, more demands ensued at over 80 colleges in the United States. The Black Liberation Collective has sought to unify and centralize information about such efforts to create more equitable and inclusive institutions (Black Liberation Collective, n.d)

Recent demands for institutional accountability and inclusion are reminiscent of a period historically called the Black Campus Movement (1965-1972) (Kendi, 2012). Academic

institutions have long been perpetrators of anti-black normalization, instigation, and violence through course offerings, staffing, and endowment investments. Student advocacy has led to the establishment of Black and ethnic studies in the curriculum, the hiring of more staff of color, positions that support the development of students of color, and cultural centers. Simply stated, higher education exists to serve students; the lifecycle of a degree program implies a set amount of time as a member of the campus-community. Student demands for improvement often come at a cost to their studies, mental health and emotional well-being. Their activism and labor benefits not only their successors, but the entire college community.

### **Methodology**

In February 2021 the researchers searched the demands on the Black Liberation Collective website for mentions of the words “library(-ies), archive(s), and collection(s)”. Our search yielded seven cases (8%) where college/university libraries were directly indicated in the student activists' demands for change. At the time of the analysis there were 86 lists representing 85 colleges plus the Atlanta Black Student United organization, geographically representing institutions and student activists from 28 states, DC, and Canada. The makeup of institutions varied widely; the breadth of institutions was diverse, and representative of the many different educational cultures/experiences undergraduate students have available to them. The dataset reflects the diversity of institutions.

Based on the criteria of investigation, the institutions are as follows:

- Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire;
- Emmanuel College, Boston, Massachusetts;
- Lewis and Clark College, Portland, Oregon;
- New York University, NYC, New York;
- University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan
- University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina;
- Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut

In our analysis of the seven cases, we took a journalistic approach analyzing websites (both current and through use of the Wayback Machine), news articles, strategic plans, mission statements, and social media (e.g. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram). In addition to reviewing library

and institutional websites, we thoroughly searched the social media accounts of Black Student Unions or other student activist groups, we looked at organization pages and events for these student run organizations, and extensively searched each institution's student-run newspapers. Throughout the investigation and writing process, the authors' have revisited their sources and conducted additional research to highlight any recent developments at these institutions.

The authors chose not to conduct interviews or solicit institutions for further information, but instead focused research and analysis on information that was publicly discoverable online. Our choice was deliberate; ensuring an objective, unbiased point of view for our conclusions, we strictly analyzed publicly-discoverable sources. While other anti-racist efforts, policies, and projects may have been enacted in the past six years, this paper solely looks at the demands proposed by the student activists of the Black Liberation Collective in 2016 and the progress and commitments that have addressed those demands.

The demands spanned an interesting variety of issues, from naming to cultural appropriation to collections. Some of these demands were institution-specific (i.e. the naming of the NYU library) and others that were more generalized across the profession (i.e. Library of Congress Subject Headings). Each case is analyzed separately to examine how they were addressed.

Table 1. Library Engagement and Updates Related to Student Demands by Media Source\*

	Dartmouth	Emmanuel	L & C	NYU	U of M	UNC CH	Wesleyan
Library Social Media	X	X					X
Student Org (ex. Black Student Union, Student Government, etc.)	X			X	X		X
Student Newspaper	X	X		X	X		X
Library website	X	X	X		X	X	X
Google Searches	X			X			
University Diversity Office		X	X				X
Institutional Searches	X	X		X			X
Outside media news article	X				X	X	X

\*As of August 2021

The table above demonstrates the online media source utilized by each institution to address, engage, or provide updates to student demands. Following Mestre's (2011) methodology of seeking expressions of diversity on ARL websites, utilizing the web is important in making information more widely available. We recognize that institutions have a range of resources and access to media outlets and the absence of any media outlet for each institution is indicated in the table.

#### **Acknowledgement of Possible Limitations**

As researchers in the library and information field and academic librarians/archivists, our dataset for the intentions of this investigation was strictly limited to the lists with direct mention of college/university libraries. While this only represented 8% of total institutions from the Black Liberation Collective website, our dataset acknowledges the specific, granular calls to action and

voices of the student activists at the 86 institutions represented. Not only do they have institutional culture expertise and the experience of being a community member of these institutions, their voices are those of the individuals being underserved and demanding action. The authors would like to acknowledge the labor and effort of student activists in being vocal in effecting change, and the toll that such tireless work takes on these individuals. Recent literature (Linder, et al., 2019), as well as many college-published resources for activist self-care, addresses the burnout that engaging in student activism and social justice initiatives take on these students. As such, our dataset is reflective of these voices and experiences.

Additionally, we acknowledge that there is a disparity amongst these seven institutions in their available resources - in terms of endowments, library budget, and staffing. Less resource-rich institutions can be at a disadvantage when it comes to their web presence. Our research represents publicly available content, with an emphasis on the library's websites, documents and social media; additionally, the authors sought out online information from on-campus student groups. While our research was thorough in what we found using our journalistic approach and the variety of sources we sought out, we acknowledge that some of these institutions may have addressed the demands of the students but have not publicized their work.

### **Library Relevant Demands from the Black Liberation Collective Website & Recommendations**

#### **Dartmouth College, Baker-Berry Library**

Dartmouth College's Baker-Berry Library is the main library space on campus that houses the College's humanities/social sciences collections. There are nine libraries in total at Dartmouth College, and a search of the Libraries staff directory lists 35 librarians. Dartmouth College's current undergraduate enrollment is listed at 4,459 (U.S. News and World Report, 2021).

#### **BLC Demands**

**"The library search catalog system shall use undocumented instead of "illegal" in reference to immigrants." ("Our Demands," n.d.)**

Dartmouth College student activists took on a hard-fought battle to change the outdated and offensive Library of Congress Subject Heading (LCSH) "illegal alien(s)" to "unauthorized immigrants". This demand brought public attention to a flaw in the inner-workings of

librarianship, and led to successful joint action between students and library workers.

Technical services and cataloging labor is dependent on largely-adopted protocols/shared vocabularies, and widely invisible to the communities they serve. Changing subject headings is outside the control of a singular institution; appeals must be made to the Library of Congress (LOC). Students from the Dartmouth Coalition for Immigration Reform, Equality and

DREAMers (CoFRIED) brought their concerns about the use of “illegal aliens” to the Baker-Berry Library. Librarians explained the inability to make LCSH changes institutionally, advised

students on how to present the case to the LOC and partnered with them (Albright, 2016). LOC initially rejected the proposed petition for change from CoFRIED, but after a resolution from ALA (ALA Council, 2016), scrutiny/support throughout the library community, LOC resolved to turn “illegal alien” into two subject headings, “non-citizens” and “unauthorized immigration” (Blakemore, 2016). On November 12, 2021 the Library of Congress published their intent to change the subject heading “illegal alien” and “aliens” into “non-citizens.” In contrast to the 2016 attempt, they maintain use of the term “illegal immigration” as the established heading for “unauthorized immigration” (Library of Congress, 2021). In response, the Change the Subject film Twitter account posted registration information for virtual conversations in November through December 2021 ('Change the Subject' Film, 2021).

This joint initiative between student activists and Dartmouth librarians was documented in the 2019 film “Change the Subject” (Albright, 2019). This successful collaboration has brought a renewed attention to the outdated, potentially offensive, subject headings that are in use.

“Change the Subject” screenings on college campuses nationwide and discussions centered on the film at professional conferences, such as ACRL2021, have helped focus the discussion examining LCSHs to reflect the world we live in today. Of the seven cases we have investigated in the course of our research, the 2015 BLC student demands and the Libraries’ responsive collaborative action is the most well-documented and publicized of all cases. The success of the “Change the Subject” initiative can be connected to the 2015 Dartmouth student activists’ demand to update antiquated and offensive language in library catalogs.

## **Emmanuel College, Cardinal Cushing Library**

Emmanuel College's Cardinal Cushing Library at present has seven librarians & library administrators on staff, representing instruction, outreach, access services, collection strategies, electronic resources, special projects and archives. The collection is home to 250,000+ books and ebooks, 3600 journal subscriptions and over 60+ databases. Undergraduate enrollment is currently 2,222 (U.S. News and World Report, 2021).

### **BLC Demands**

**“WE DEMAND that \$3000 be immediately allotted for a collection of African Diaspora Literature. Library staff will collaborate and directly consult with black students at Emmanuel College and the joint Africana Studies program at Simmons College to create the list of books that should be purchased. Library staff will then consult with these two entities (black students at EC and Simmons Africana Studies department) to group books into their respective disciplines.**

**Example: Black literature, narratives, politics, sciences, art and aesthetics, popular culture, theatre, theology, history, contemporary works, critical thought, philosophy, music, education, etc..)” (“Our Demands, n.d.)**

In 2014, activists from Emmanuel College's Black Student Union released lists of demands urging accountability/action from College administration to improve the experience of BIPOC students; Emmanuel's 2015 publication on the Black Liberation Collective website was both a follow-up to the previous demands, and reiteration of the key areas of inequity students wanted addressed (“Our Demands,” n.d.). Based on the graduation dates of the signatories and the timing of the Black Liberation Collection demands website, the demands for Emmanuel College are likely from the 2015 release. Student activists demanded Emmanuel College's Cardinal Cushing Library establish a \$3000 collection fund for resources on the topic of the African Diaspora. Content should include Black narratives, literature, history, politics, pop culture, etc., and students requested the development of this collection be in collaboration with both the Black Student Union and the joint Africana Studies Program at nearby Simmons College.

Prioritizing diverse voices in library collections is a discussion happening inside and outside of the library profession; the timing/demands of Emmanuel's BSU were very much in-step with

conversations nationwide about the criticality of representation in collection development. On April 2014 the #weneeddiversebooks hashtag was launched and a non-profit with a board of YA and children's book authors was incorporated in June 2014 (Sun, 2014). In 2016 ALA launched the Our Voices initiative to explore best practices in collection development (American Library Association, 2016). Gugilde (2021) recommends that diversity statements in collection development be simple and include budget allocations.

In examining Emmanuel's student newspaper, The Hub (via the Wayback Machine), the authors found a detailed report of the BSU's demands with faculty and student responses that were raised publicly (Wright, 2015). This December 8th, 2015 news article made specific mention of the \$3000 collection fund, along with input from student activists about the negative impact the lack of diverse literature had on multiculturalism programs/international studies at the College. A letter to the editor from the then-library director responded to the concerns of students; a new resource guide for Africana Studies was introduced, there were plans to meet with the BSU's board to discuss needs/establish an ongoing-relationship, and the Emmanuel community was invited to make recommendations for multicultural materials missing from library collections (von Daum Tholl, 2016). We did not discover any follow-up news items. While it is possible Emmanuel College established this fund and carry out some other collection development initiatives focused on the African Diaspora, but we have not found specific mention of this work. The archived library blog does show a post about Black History Month in February 2016 referencing a display collection ("Black history month," 2016). We believe this case highlights the importance of promoting collection work, as well as drawing attention to community-driven collection development and acquisitions.

### **Lewis & Clark College, Watzek Library**

At the time of writing, Watzek Library has 11 librarians & library administrators on-staff, covering a wide-range of library services, collections and support. Statistics for the 2020-2021 academic year indicates the Library at present has over 336,000+ print volumes, 314,000+ eBooks and 46,000+ periodicals. Undergraduate enrollment is 1,965 students (U.S. News and World Report, 2021).

## **BLC Demands**

**“A public acknowledgement of the following facts:**

- **Lewis & Clark College was built upon stolen land through the genocide of Indigenous and Native American peoples.**
- **Through its name, Lewis & Clark College honors the lives and deeds of owners of enslaved peoples.**
- **Lewis & Clark College exploits and appropriates Indigenous and Native American cultural elements in the architecture of the Agnes Flanagan Chapel and the art installations in Aubrey R. Watzek Library.” (“Our Demands,” n.d.)**

The 2015 Black Liberation Collective demands from Lewis & Clark student activists called for the creation/adoption of an indigenous land acknowledgement and the evaluation of the indigenous art and appropriation on-campus. While the demands address institution-wide issues of Lewis & Clark’s namesakes being enslavers and its construction on stolen Indigenous land, of particular note was appropriation and missing attribution of Indigenous culture in the Watzek Library. The semester prior, Lewis and Clark Black Student Union shared recommendations to improve “widely engaged dialogue about diversity and cultural awareness in our community” and specific proposals for hiring, professional development, and integration of diversity content in pre-existing programs and structures (Black Student Union, 2015).

At the time of the authors research, the College’s Office of Equity and Inclusion has a land acknowledgment statement on their webpages, along with several Lewis & Clark student organizations. The wide adoption of an Indigenous land acknowledgement is absent from College’s overall web-presence, and the Watzek Library. In addition to naming the traditional and ancestral Indigenous nations, the acknowledgement states “It is important to acknowledge the ancestors of this place and recognize that we are here because of the sacrifices forced upon them.” (Lewis & Clark, n.d.) The statement does not include such words the students demanded like stolen, genocide, enslavement or words in their likeness. While all institutions must reckon with the original inhabitants of the land in which these institutions reside, Lewis & Clark is named after the leaders of the famous expedition that encountered many Indigenous people and communities, and led to forced removals and the creation of anti-Indian policies, such as the

Indian Removal Act and Indian Appropriations Act.

Originally chartered as the Albany Collegiate Institute, the institution formally became Albany College and changed the name to Lewis & Clark in 1942. The current college library, Watzek Library, was built in 1967. Watzek Library and the Agnes Flanagan Chapel were both designed by Paul Thiry, an American architect of French descent. He incorporated Native American imagery into his design of the facade on the west side of the library, and Indigenous artist Don Lelooska (Smith) was commissioned to create sculptural work outside both buildings. The owl, part of Lelooska's sculpture at the Library's entrance, is incorporated and intrinsically linked to the Watzek Library's branding and public presence.

The Library as a site of community has art installations created by Indigenous artists or influenced by Indigenous culture. The Library includes several publicly displayed artworks created by Indigenous artists. In 2017, the Watzek Library published a LibGuide for the art, imagery and architectural elements found in their space (most recent update July 26, 2021) (Jensen, 2021). The LibGuide is an interactive map and provides basic bibliographic information. A few works have more information than others such as the meaning or cultural context, while others are outlined on the map and do not have an image, title or information. More consistent and robust detailing about these works of art would likely improve community insight about the context and background of the artists. The incorporation of more information would further position and inform the community to evaluate the possibility of exploitation and appropriation.

### **New York University, Elmer Holmes Bobst Library**

The Bobst Library is the flagship library at NYU. A search in the staff directory for "librarian" and "bobst" reveals 30 librarians; given the size of the library, library system and university though, the authors are unsure how accurate this headcount is. Bobst Library has 18 departments representative of the wide-range of services, disciplines and administrative needs of a sizeable university library. New York University Libraries hold 5.8 million print volumes, and over 2 million eBooks. NYU's undergraduate enrollment is 26,981 students (U.S. News and World Report, 2021).

## **BLC Demands**

### **“13. Reparations**

**a. Rededicate Library from Elmer Holmes Bobst, a known anti-Semite; removal of Elihu Root’s name from the School of Law Scholarship for being an advocate of US Colonialism; renaming of the Fales Collection of English Literature within Bobst, as Fales family fortunes can be traced to colonial slavery. Rename these for POC or people of marginalized communities in the US who have been leaders in activism and advocacy of oppressed groups, OR leaders of equal style and caliber from the Global South.” (“Our Demands,” n.d)**

New York University’s list of demands focused on the renaming of buildings/collections named after known anti-semites, racists and enslavers. For the purpose of this article, we have focused our attention on the call to action to rename Bobst Library. While there were calls for the additional renamings of library spaces & collections, the focus on Bobst has received repeated attention and calls to action over the years. It is of note that roughly 13% of NYU undergraduates identify as Jewish and the campus is ranked highly in Hillel International’s Guide to Jewish Life at Colleges and Universities (Hillel International, n.d.). Elmer Holmes Bobst was a known anti-semite, and his racist and disparaging remarks against the Jewish people are well-documented.

The library’s benefactor and name-sake, Elmer Holmes Bobst, was a close friend of former president Richard Nixon and a pharmaceutical magnate; Nixon at times referred to Bobst as his “surrogate father”. President Nixon’s presidential papers at the National Archives include correspondence filled with anti-semitic sentiments, inflammatory language and gross accusations against the Jewish community from Bobst to Nixon (Ringle, 1997). Additionally, the library’s namesake was accused of sexual abuse by two female family members after his death in 1978; both survivors have sued the estate (Associated Press, 1991).

There have been numerous calls for stripping the Bobst Library of the name, all of which have been unacknowledged. Our research unearthed multiple op-eds from the NYU student newspaper and the Washington Square News in 2015 (Schachere) and 2017 (Zimmerman) and a Change.org petition calling for the renaming of the building (Stricker, ca. 2018). In a 2016 Washington Square news article, student activists spoke about the University’s reception to the list of demands from NYU’s Black and Brown Collation and progress that had been made thus far.

While the students reported some positive action on the University's behalf, the request to strip the library of the Bobst name was pointedly ignored (Roy, 2016). Additionally, our research uncovered a 2017-2018 resolution from the Student Senators Council passing a resolution to remove the Bobst name (NYU Student Senators Council, ca. 2017); we found no further action was taken.

Bobst's widow, Mamdouha S. Bobst, and his estate have made additional donations to the Library over the years. While his initial donation in the 1960's accounts for the initial naming, renovations in 2003-2004 and 2012 have been attributed to the continued support of the Bobst family (Wolford and Johnson, 2017). Additionally, an August 2021 search of NYU Libraries' website indicated there has been no changes to the name of the Fales Collection at the Bobst Library.

### **University of Michigan, Bentley Historical Library**

Unlike other libraries the authors have investigated in this study, the University of Michigan's Bentley Historical Library is a separate entity from the U-M library system. The Bentley's collecting scope is both University of Michigan history and Michigan state history. The library is home to over 11,000 research collections (Bentley Historical Library, 2021). At present, the Bentley Historical Library lists 16 archivists and administrators. University of Michigan undergraduate enrollment is currently listed at 31,266 students (U.S. News and World Report, 2021).

### **BLC Demands**

**"6. We demand for increased disclosure of all documents within the Bentley Library. There should be transparency about the University and its past dealing with race relations." ("Our Demands," n.d.)**

In fall of 2013, University of Michigan Black Student Union initiated conversations about college race relations with the twitter hashtag #BBUM (Being Black at University of Michigan) along with a list of demands. The list of demands to the U of M Board of Regents included transparency of the history of race relations at U-M at the Bentley Library (Cmaadmin, 2014). To address a demand for "increased disclosure", Bentley Historical Library staff collaborated with the Black Student Union to digitize records by the Department of AfroAmerican and

African Studies, as well as material of Black organizations and activism. This project prioritized providing student access to these collections. With funding by the Office of the Provost, the Bentley Historical Library digitized more than 66,000 online images and created an online portal (launched in fall 2018) providing online access to students, faculty, and staff (Zielin, 2018). Online-access to these archives is restricted to those with U-M credentials. Citing copyright concerns as a barrier, selections were to be made for outside researchers. Nineteen collections were contributed to Project STAND, although the outside access denial remained in place. Placing the collection in this space promotes the existence of this material and requires information seekers to reach out to determine access possibilities.

### **University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Davis Library**

The UNC Chapel Hill Library system is home to 12 libraries; Davis Library is UNC Chapel Hill's flagship library. A search of the UNC Chapel Hill's library directory has 60 librarians in August 2021. A search of the Libraries' website for collection statistics has the most recent count as 9.917 million print and electronic volumes across the library system in 2016 (UNC University Libraries, 2017). Current enrollment statistics note 19,355 undergraduates (U.S. News and World Report, 2021).

### **BLC Demands**

**"5. We DEMAND that University cafeterias, gym memberships, libraries, and class registration be free to all residents of North Carolina regardless of admittance into the institution." ("Our Demands," n.d)**

UNC Chapel Hill held a town hall on November 19, 2015 on race and inclusion where protestors introduced their list of demands later posted online (Khrais, 2015). Student activists called for a myriad of changes, shared many examples of microaggressions and the systemic issues that left BIPOC students feeling underrepresented and unsupported. Among their demands were several focusing on opening up free education/services to North Carolina residents, including free access to the library and its collections.

In our research we could not find references to the demand for free library access in the three months following the publication of the list. By using the Wayback Machine we were able to determine that public access to the library has stayed the same since it was in May 2015, prior to

the publication of the demands (UNC University Libraries, 2015). Any North Carolina resident 14 and older can get a borrowing card, but there is a \$25 annual fee (UNC University Libraries, n.d.b). Ferguson (2020) analyzed the websites of 15 institutions across the UNC system and found that all university libraries had a fee for public borrowers ranging from \$10 to \$49 with \$25 being the most common. UNC Wilmington was an exception by allowing residents 65 and over to use the library for free (15-16). Dole and Hill (2011) found that after dropping unaffiliated borrower fees at the University of Arkansas Little Rock, the number of accounts and use of materials increased. Over approximately four years 5% of unaffiliated borrowers lost materials. A subsequent study found that the open-door policy did increase goodwill among unaffiliated borrowers (Dole and Hill, 2012).

While the 2015 demand to provide free borrowing services at UNC Libraries has gone unchanged, the authors found that following the murder of George Floyd, BLM protests/activism and the call for increased institutional accountability, the UNC University Libraries launched the “Reckoning Initiative Framework”. The Framework, introduced in summer 2020, has served as a guide while the Libraries address DEI, inequality and anti-racism initiatives. The initiative has a multitude of projects currently underway; one of which is resources addressing the removal of the confederate monument Silent Sam (UNC University Libraries, n.d.a). The 2015 BLC demands called for the removal of Silent Sam and all confederate monuments in the UNC system. While this demand was not specifically addressed to the Libraries, they addressed both the history and controversy of campus-spaces and the contested statue as the stewards of UNC Chapel Hill History. A 2016 digital exhibit by University Archives staff makes available a myriad of archival resources and objects surrounding the Silent Sam sculpture (University Archives, 2016). The authors found this an interesting example of institutional accountability and transparency; instead of whitewashing the troubled history of the statue and limiting access to materials that would paint the institution in a negative light, archivists have offered an unedited view of the history and controversy of the confederate statue.

### **Wesleyan University, Olin Memorial Library**

Olin Memorial Library currently lists 17 librarians and library administrators on their staff directory. Listed library departments include Circulation, Acquisitions, Research Services,

Special Collections & Archives, etc., as well specialized departments/curated collections such as the Archaeology and Anthropology Collections and the Davidson Art Center. Wesleyan University's undergraduate student population is 3,018 (U.S. News and World Report, 2021).

### **BLC Demands**

**“B. The offices of the Director of Multicultural Affairs and the Equity Advocate will be located in this center. The Center for African-American Studies (CAAS) and the University Organizing Center (UOC), though essential, are not substitutes for a Multicultural Center. The UOC exists as a student-run space and CAAS is specific to African American Studies and members of the African Diaspora. The multicultural center must be provided with institutional support and additional financial resources. Furthermore, it would be the location of an archive specifically for student activism around SOC - related issues and empowerment.” (“Our Demands,” n.d.)**

Student activists at Wesleyan University called for the creation of a Multicultural Center, as well as the creation of an archive of student activism regarding students of color to be housed in the proposed Multicultural Center. The objectives of the protest were stated to “express national solidarity” and “face institutional inequities” (“Wesleyan Students,” 2015). As a response to the protest Wesleyan University President Michael Roth convened an Equity Task Force which released recommendations in May 2016, including the development of the resource center (Equity Task Force, 2016).

On September 28th, 2017 Wesleyan University's Resource Center opened with an “intellectually grounded mission in social justice and a focus on intercultural development and literacy”. The news release acknowledged that the Center came out of student demands at the “IsThisWhy?” protest on campus in fall 2015 (O. Drake, 2017). A recent search (August 2021) of The Resource Center found that since its inception in 2017, the Center has flourished in the scope of programs, resources and events they offer. Additionally, The Resource Center is home to a Lending Library of over 2,500 books spanning a wide-range of social justice, multicultural and activism topics (“Wesleyan University Student,” n.d.). Additionally, first generation and low-income students are able to request textbooks, either already in the collection or as a new acquisition, to be checked out monthly during the duration of their classes.

The Resource Center though does not have the requested student activism archive. A search of

the digital collections and archives at the Olin Memorial Library at present do not return relevant results for “student activism” indicating at present there is not a publicly-discoverable collection. announced the launch of the Wesleyan Black Lives Matter Project, soliciting stories from Wesleyan students on their experience with racism, BLM activism, and other work against systemic racism (Nelson, 2020).

More recent library initiatives the authors have discovered in their research included a July 21, 2021 library blog post outlining the Olin Memorial Library’s progress on social justice and equity work. The blog indicates that in July 2020 library staff formed five separate teams to examine and investigate practices to combat system racism and promote DEI and social justice. Each group shares goals and accomplishments from the past year of work, and invites feedback and suggestions from the community, both on- and off-campus (Hadley, 2021).

### **Discussion**

The authors’ investigation into the progress made by academic libraries and archives in the collected demands by the Black Liberation Collective revealed varying levels of success in addressing the calls for change from student activists. The review and analysis of the seven institutions in our dataset has led the authors to compile recommended anti-racist practices for consideration.

#### **Creating and Cultivating Relationships**

Our mission in academic libraries first and foremost is to support our students' scholarship and information needs. Solicit student feedback by inviting students to provide feedback through focus groups, surveys and additional information-gathering activities. Cultivate relationships with student organizations and work towards establishing ongoing partnerships. These are increasingly valuable relationships to prioritize; they both ensure continuity through changes in membership and improve institutional memory. A key praxis of libraries with underrepresented populations in particular should focus on addressing past exclusions through an anti-racist lens and contribute to relationship building with students of color by ensuring they are specifically connected with the library.

#### **Prioritize and Promote Library’s Collection Work and Responsive Actions**

College libraries and archives are the stewards of the history of their institution; by electing to

ignore or hide controversial institutional memories and events, we are leaving scholars an inaccurate, biased history. Libraries must increase transparency and accountability in the collecting and contextualization of institutional history. Highlighting and promoting print or digital collections, archival description and digitization projects and new/existing collection funds is a way organizations can showcase their responsive development of library collections to suit their communities. Participating and contributing to cross institutional initiatives such as Project STAND which creates a centralized space highlighting student activism in underrepresented communities (n.d.a) demonstrates a commitment in making accessible and being in conversation about the legacy of student activism. Investing in resources to bring about change can take many iterations. This could be securing or repurposing funds for targeted programing, digitization/description projects, investing in a tool-kit or creating paid opportunities for student activist feedback and engagement. In many cases, student activists have to seek out libraries for preservation of their materials. An intentional, anti-racist transparent library process would for example request students to donate ephemera they've created related to their activist work to ensure "the movement lives on as part of the historical legacy of the institution".

### **Acknowledgement and Accountability**

If addressing issues raised in a survey, suggestion box, or through student activism, it is valuable to acknowledge the change and the feedback that spurred it. This is a further demonstration of responsiveness and accountability to the changing social and political climate. Creating an online-space that acknowledges/names student demands, and includes the library's acknowledgment and response is key to institutional accountability. Student demands often appear in letters addressed to the administration and are reprinted in student newspapers. Republishing demands in the library web-space demonstrates a commitment to community remembrance and action, and a responsibility to institutional memory and record-keeping. When making changes organizations should credit the labor of student activists and how their demands inform how our institutions evolve responsively. It is also imperative to credit the often invisible labor that goes into collection and digitization work. Unacknowledged collection work is a disservice to those who contribute to the success of projects. Additionally, libraries should adopt the practice of publishing the library's diversity plan, accompanying goals and committee

progress. In doing this, an organization can offer tangible and evolving evidence of their ongoing work and commitment. The nature of the four year undergraduate degree lends itself to the natural attrition of vocal student leaders. By creating accountability structures and long-term agreements that outlive the tenure of the students advocating for change, an organization can demonstrate long-term commitment and accountability. Increasing public knowledge of the responsive actions in the library demonstrates the library's responsiveness to listening to students advocating for change. Beyond the importance of understanding how libraries can embrace student activism as a critical engagement of lived experiences and ideologies that are often ignored in scholarship, is the reality that libraries continue to lack racial and ethnic diversity within the field. In a September 2021 open-letter issued by WOC + LIB, a website created for women of color in librarianship to dialog about experiences in a predominately-White field, BIPOC librarians denounce the history of appropriation and lip service to diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice efforts in the library. Public signaling that proclaims the commitment to championing diversity within the profession does not necessarily equate to a positive cultural shift. The letter-writers outline that the culture of "self-congratulatory whiteness" continues to harm and diminish the work, accomplishments, and opportunities for BIPOC librarians (Brown et al, 2021). The lived-experience of BIPOC knowledge workers in a field that proclaims a commitment to DEI oftentimes without substantive action, as well as the calls for change from student activists, indicates there is still much work to do to effect systemic change in academic libraries.

These recommendations are far from exhaustive, and the critical work of cultivating a culture of diversity, inclusivity and equity is constantly evolving to meet the needs of the communities we serve. The above reflections speak to themes the authors identified throughout their research.

### **Conclusion**

Calls for reparations, voting rights protection and defunding the police have gone largely unaddressed in the United States. The response has been making Juneteenth a national holiday and the popularity of institutional anti-racist commitment statements. Concurrently, the statement Black Lives Matter has been commodified. It is critical to honor the labor and demands of student activists and take seriously their vision for equity.

The murder of George Floyd in its horrific and documented death sent ripples through society in summer 2020 and spurred over 10,600 Black Lives Matter protests across America (ACLED, 2020). Citizens that had never been to a public demonstration were spurred to action and publicly said enough to the senseless, sanctioned, police brutality that has stolen far too many Black lives. The momentum of this moment must not be lost to competing priorities or superficial gestures. While the crux of our work has been rooted in examining the response to the student demands from the Black Liberation Collective 2015, our work exists in the present and cannot help but be informed by current responses to the anti-racism movement and activism. While libraries were only mentioned in 8% in the student demands compiled by the Black Liberation Collective, these spaces also require racial reckonings. This article reviewed library engagement with student demands and the digital spaces in which memorialization of actions, acknowledgements, and updates took place. With continued demands to dismantle systemic racism in higher education, libraries have the opportunity to model commitment. By listening to the voices of the student leaders we serve, evolving to meet their needs and examining our institution's past, present and future, academic libraries can provide leadership on campus to effect lasting change.

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<sup>1</sup> The published resource includes this typo.

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