

**Professional Submission**

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## **Inclusive Shelves: Embracing Diversity in Library Collections**

Breaking the Bookshelves' Bias: How Libraries are Writing the Story of Diversity in Their Collections, Challenging Norms and Elevating Underrepresented Voices.

### **Introduction: Embracing Diversity in Library Collections**

In the evolving world of public libraries, a transformative trend is emerging: the diversification of library collections. This initiative, deeply rooted in the Core Values of Librarianship as defined by the American Library Association - including Access, Confidentiality/Privacy, Democracy, Diversity, Education and Lifelong Learning, Intellectual Freedom, Preservation, the Public Good, Professionalism, Service, and Social Responsibility (ALA, Core Values as cited in McCook & Bossaler, 2018, p. 66) - transcends the mere expansion of resources to encompass a movement towards inclusivity. By reflecting the diverse voices and experiences of communities, libraries are now actively addressing the historical underrepresentation of marginalized groups in literature. This paper examines how public libraries are not just acknowledging but actively responding to this need for diversity, thereby enriching the literary world and fostering a more inclusive society.



Figure 1: A modern, diverse library with a wide range of books representing various cultures and authors. The setting is welcoming, with patrons of different ages, abilities and backgrounds, highlighting inclusivity and community. Created by DALL·E, 2023.

## The Necessity for Diversity in Library Collections: Addressing Historical Imbalances

The push to diversify library collections is a response to the longstanding dominance of a homogenous narrative in literature. Traditionally, the literary world has been marked by a significant underrepresentation of authors and characters from varied ethnic, cultural, and social backgrounds. Recognizing this gap, libraries have begun to source a broader spectrum of works, reflecting the diversity of the communities they serve. This endeavor is crucial in transforming libraries from passive holders of information to active participants in the cultural dialogue, shaping societal understanding and discourse (Adichie, 2009).

## **Implementing Diversity: Strategies and Challenges**

Adopting diversity in collections involves various strategies. Community engagement is key to understanding the needs of patrons and collaborating with local schools and groups ensures collections are responsive and relevant (Jaeger et al., 2014). The digital revolution has expanded the scope of materials available, including works by independent authors and smaller publishers (Lor, 2019). However, challenges like budget constraints and reliance on traditional publishing channels persist.

Moreover, effective staff training in areas like disability awareness is crucial for inclusive library environments. Kowalsky and Woodruff (2017) emphasize the importance of ongoing training, not only for new staff but also for veteran employees, on serving patrons with disabilities. This includes workshops on listening techniques, conscious word choice, and sensitivity to actions and reactions. Such training is key in fostering an inclusive atmosphere where libraries can effectively serve and support all community members, including those with disabilities.

Equipping library staff with the necessary skills and understanding to promote and manage diverse collections is essential. The continuous process of learning and adaptation within the library staff is vital in ensuring that the diverse needs of the community are met effectively and empathetically.

## **Librarian Roles: Exemplars of Diversification**

Certain libraries have set benchmarks in diversifying their collections. For example, the Brooklyn Public Library and the San Francisco Public Library are exemplary in their initiatives to promote LGBTQ+ literature and reflect their community's diversity. The Brooklyn Public Library actively supports the LGBTQ+ community through

various programs, including educational workshops for families and caregivers (Brooklyn Public Library, 2022). Similarly, the San Francisco Public Library, home to the Hormel LGBTQIA Center, celebrates Pride with a wide array of programs and exhibits, emphasizing queer creativity and inclusivity in their community outreach efforts (San Francisco Public Library, 2023). These initiatives highlight the libraries' commitment to creating inclusive spaces that represent and support diverse voices and narratives.

Librarians are pivotal in this transformation, responsible for material selection, community event organization, and patron education. Their role is integral in ensuring that diverse voices are not just included but also emphasized within the library's collection (Garces-Bacsal, 2022).

### **Support and Future Directions: Sustaining the Movement for Diversity**

Professional associations like the American Library Association (ALA) play a supportive role, providing resources and guidance for libraries embarking on diversification efforts (American Library Association, 2021). McCook & Bossaler (2018) highlight the crucial role of local, state, and federal funding in expanding access to library services and the ongoing need for advocacy to address service and equity gaps. This advocacy, supported by organizations like ALA's Office for Library Advocacy, is essential in shaping legislative actions and securing funding for libraries. Looking forward, as global societies become more interconnected, the demand for diverse and inclusive literature will likely intensify. Libraries must continue to adapt and innovate in their practices and offerings, using various methods, including social networking tools, to communicate the importance of libraries and sustain the momentum for diversity.

### **Conclusion: Redefining the Role of Libraries in a Diverse Society**

The movement towards diversifying library collections is a pivotal step towards building a more inclusive, understanding, and representative society. It reflects a broader societal shift towards celebrating diversity in all its forms. By expanding access to diverse collections, libraries are not only enriching patrons' literary experiences but also playing a crucial role in shaping a society that values understanding and inclusivity. This paradigm shift is not only beneficial for library patrons but also indicative of the broader societal embrace of diversity, marking libraries as integral to the narrative of cultural inclusivity and representation.

The commitment to diversity in libraries goes beyond adding varied titles to shelves; it represents a fundamental shift in the philosophy of librarianship. Libraries are evolving from neutral information custodians to proactive advocates for social equity and cultural awareness. This transformation positions libraries as community hubs that reflect and cater to the multifaceted nature of the societies they serve. By providing access to a diverse range of literature, libraries empower patrons to explore and understand the myriad experiences that shape our world. Such initiatives have significant implications for fostering empathy and understanding among library patrons. When people engage with stories that reflect experiences different from their own, they gain a greater appreciation of other cultures, lifestyles, and viewpoints. This exposure is invaluable in cultivating a society that values empathy and mutual respect.

For younger generations, access to diverse literature is particularly impactful. Seeing their experiences reflected in books validates their identity and fosters a sense of belonging. Conversely, exposure to stories from different cultures and backgrounds broadens their horizons and prepares them to thrive in a diverse world.

The pursuit of diversity in library collections also inspires publishers, authors, and content creators to produce works that reflect the diversity of human experience. This can lead to a virtuous cycle where increased demand for diverse literature spurs more of its production, enriching the literary landscape. Finally, this movement towards diverse collections in libraries reaffirms the fundamental principles of librarianship: providing equitable access to information and fostering an informed and engaged community. Libraries are not just repositories of knowledge but dynamic spaces that can shape community values and societal norms.

In essence, the pursuit of diversity in library collections acknowledges the power of literature to bridge divides, foster understanding, and celebrate the rich tapestry of human experience. As libraries continue to champion this cause, they contribute significantly to the creation of a more inclusive and empathetic society.

### **Author Bio**

Amanda Tumminelli, an aspiring librarian, is advancing her expertise in Library and Information Science at Old Dominion University. Her focus is on special and academic libraries, supported by her educational background and a Master's Degree in Management and Leadership. This unique combination of skills positions her well for library administration and innovative program development. Passionate about working with youth and education, Amanda is adept at designing library programs that captivate and educate young audiences, aligning with her professional goals in librarianship.

A lifelong learner, Amanda is actively engaged in exploring the latest trends in library science, illustrating her commitment to staying updated in the dynamic field of

information management. Her enthusiasm extends to teaching others, sharing knowledge and new skills. As she continues her academic journey, Amanda is poised to make significant contributions to the library community, particularly in program development and youth engagement, reinforcing the pivotal role of libraries as educational and cultural institutions.



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