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PLEASE GIVE ME THE OPPORTUNITY TO FIND OUT

Perspectives of a Library Diversity Resident Seeking to Imagine the Future

Deborah Caldwell

In this article I will share some of my thoughts as a library diversity resident, as well as the inherent tensions and larger social issues associated with residencies. These comments are informed by my own personal experience in becoming a resident, as well as my experience helping to organize a Library Diversity Institute.

WHY CHOOSE A TERM-LIMITED POSITION?

I chose to pursue a residency rather than a full time position because I felt at the time that my actual experience and understanding of academic librarianship was inadequate. The rotational nature of many residencies appealed to me, as I was concerned about limiting myself unnecessarily to one too-specific career path.

The flexibility of choosing between different departments to work with was extremely appealing, and I thought this was my best chance to supplement my graduate school practicum experience with an opportunity to sample other library specializations before making a commitment. Choosing a term-limited position rather than (theoretically) more stable, permanent position was a risk, but one I felt necessary to make up for my perceived gaps in experience. I knew that at some point I would need to choose a more specialized focus, but that decision lay sometime in the non-specific future.

TRYING TO IMAGINE FUTURE CAREER GOALS

During one of the many committee meetings that were part of my interview process for this residency, I was asked a question that went something like, “What is your process for setting and achieving long term career goals?”

This wasn’t the only question during that process that gave me pause, but it might be the one that required the most vulnerability from me to answer honestly. I thought about all the

different factors that affect my thinking about the future, and how those factors affected my answer to that question. I’m a “recession millennial” (Hobbes 2017), a “Great Recession graduate” (Oreopoulos, von Wachter, and Heisz 2012), part of the “new lost generation” (Rampell 2015) with the requisite “wealth gap” (Kahn 2010) and “career lag” (Adamy and Overberg 2019) and “crushing debt” (Arengé, Perry, and Tallevi 2018). On top of that, I was being questioned by a room full of mostly white people as to my credentials for a position that was designed entirely to give someone like me that long elusive “boost” (Oreopoulos, von Wachter, and Heisz 2012) towards that long elusive career thing I’d heard so much about. My first real grown-up job was in sight, one measured not in hours or weeks but in *years*.

I cannot describe accurately the vertigo caused by the perspective shift, or the panic that question incited.

Here’s the thing about living hand to mouth, paycheck to paycheck, shoveling out of one debt into the next to try to get enough height and foothold to climb your way out of at least some of the muck: it becomes really difficult to think beyond the boundaries set for you by due dates and paychecks and the next inevitable unforeseen minor disaster. For a time, imagining any future that existed beyond the horizon of the next deadline was impossible. I’d fall off the edge of the world.

So I said, with all the bravado I could muster, “I don’t know. I don’t know what it is to be able to look that far ahead, or what kind of planner I am when the scope extends from weeks to years, but I would very much like to know.

“Please give me the opportunity to find out.”

THE LINEALITY OF TIME AND THE WESTERN MINDSET

Rasheedah Phillips in her keynote at the Digital Library Federation annual meeting in 2017 posed the question, “Who is allowed to imagine themselves in their own futures?” Through her work as a public interest attorney, artist, and science fiction writer, she asked us to question the lineality of time and how that imposes a rigid, white, Western framework on the marginalized. “The future is ever-present, both mundane and cosmic, on the matter of scale. But, again, rarely do we think about where the future is, who has access to it, and whether we are all accelerating at the same rate and pace into that future. We almost never think about how gender, race, income shift the means of access to the future.” (Phillips 2017) In Phillips’ writings on her website, *Black Quantum Futurism* (<https://www.blackquantumfuturism.com/>), she portrays time as not necessarily an inexorable march towards something inevitable. The way things are in the present doesn’t mean it will always be this way. This framework rebuts, too, the notion of an inevitable march towards “progress,” whatever that word happens to mean to the speaker at the time.

I’ve been the diversity resident librarian at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro for almost 18 months now. I’m not sure that I’m any better at long term planning, but imagining a future is something that I’ve cautiously, carefully allowed myself to indulge in. Being a resident librarian, and doing the work that came with this particular residency, makes it a necessary skill, and one that I am still learning.

LOOKING FORWARD TO OUR FUTURE SELVES

My residency has been an exercise in imagination and alternate futures—for myself as a resident, for how residencies might better serve their residents, for how academic libraries can hold on to the residents afterward—assuming that academic libraries actually want to keep their residents (see: Hathcock 2019). Much has been written of the particular challenges faced by librarians of color, and about the history, merits,

challenges, and failures of diversity residencies in addressing them. In particular, the term-limited nature of residencies means that a large number of new librarians of color face additional precarity that is uncommon among our young professional peers, which brings additional and unique stressors. Now, with the understanding that we are heading into another recession or even depression, I find my imagination tested and remind myself that there are no foregone conclusions, that oppression is not inevitable, and that we are not only allowed but have the right to look forward to our future selves.

THE 2018 AND 2019 LIBRARY DIVERSITY INSTITUTES

I came to the 2018 Library Diversity Institute the week before my official start date at UNCG understanding that my residency would be a rotation-based one and not much else. The 2018 LDI introduced me to almost 40 other early career librarians, almost all of them librarians of color. The sessions were carefully planned to educate attendees on the history of residencies and strategies for success as we planned for our futures. What stood out then was the coalition building that was made possible by the networking activities and physically being present with so many others from similar, relatable backgrounds. Feedback from resident attendees, both formal and anecdotal, was overwhelmingly centered on how helpful attendees found it to be able to build the cohort in person to mitigate the networking challenges that come with a resident’s typical isolation from their peers. Because residents are scattered across various institutions and often quite geographically isolated, the Institute allowed for personal connection and cohort bonding that would not have been possible without a single large group meeting.

This networking has resulted in a number of projects, such as the WOC+LIB initiative (<https://www.wocandlib.org/>), founded by Lorin Jackson and LaQuanda T. Onyemeh, and a residents-led and resident-only communication forum on Slack to facilitate organizing and

collaboration, spearheaded by Laura Tadena and Natalie Hill. Many residents of the 2018 cohort further developed their relationships after LDI 2018 and have since collaborated on books, papers, panels, and projects. The support networks and friendships that began at the 2018 cohort have only strengthened and grown as the cohort grew to include the 2019 Library Diversity Institute attendees. I certainly have found these connections to be invaluable and an enormous source of comfort and support.

The other feedback LDI received most during and after the 2018 institute was overwhelming interest for residency coordinators, administrators, and other stakeholders to attend as well. After joining UNCG, I was brought on as a member of the project team for LDI 2019, and we worked to accommodate that feedback by expanding the 2019 Library Diversity Institute for residents weekend into a conference looking at broader EDI issues that was open to residency coordinators and other stakeholders as well as residents. This too expanded the limits of our imaginations. We were modest in our initial estimates of how much interest it would garner, and we were surprised to find ourselves at room capacity with more than 100 registrants. The interest surfaced by the 2018 residents' institute had only grown since the previous year, and there was demand for testimonials from residents, strategies for administrators, and so much more.

The work of planning for LDI and LDRS 2019 involved a great deal of talking -- consulting with the ACRL Diversity Alliance, sharing my early experiences with other institutions interested in starting residencies, learning from former residents (some of whom were now residency coordinators themselves) about their experiences, and, most of all, talking to other residents.

PLANNING FOR A FUTURE THAT IS BOTH SUSTAINABLE AND DIVERSE

The very idea of library diversity residencies rests on the premise of a future beyond the residency -- ideally one where the

resident enters their post-residency career better prepared and more likely to stay within academic librarianship.

Despite these success stories, however, challenges remain. The practice of retaining librarians of color by scaffolding their formative post-MLS years in mentorship and targeted professional development, whether through a residency, scholarship, or other program, has not proven to be terribly effective (Hathcock 2015), and the racial demographics of academic librarians has remained at around 85% white (Bourg 2014) for some years now. If the stated goal of library diversity residencies is to retain librarians of color within academic librarianship specifically, then this too has some mixed results, and there is very little literature examining this topic. Several of the residents in my own LDI cohort have gone on to leave academic librarianship. As Dr. Jason Alston, the first resident at UNCG Libraries, noted in his session at LDRS 2019 -- despite the long history of diversity residencies in libraries, there exists scant research into the specifics of their successes and failures, and currently there are no longitudinal studies measuring long-term career outcomes of former residents. These are topics we hope to explore in more depth in upcoming issues, and the planning board invites and encourages research into this area.

I find myself, in compiling these lists of research questions and circling notes from check-ins with other residents, asking myself this question again and again: when so many residents leave the field, when the existence of this program has not actually fulfilled its stated purpose, when a program that is designed to address a problem creates more challenges that are difficult to address, then whose failure of imagination is it? I think too about my feelings of inadequacy after my master's degree, feeling certain that it needed to be supplemented and hoping that the gamble of a term position would be advantageous in the end. I can't claim that my inability to foresee recent global events to be unique to me, but then I remember the setbacks I

experienced in the wake of the 2008 recession and think perhaps my failure was not in a failure of imagination but an excess of optimism.

Universities are closing, and there will be cut and shifting budgets, and I have no doubt that some of these already precarious positions will be eliminated. The already competitive academic job market will be further limited for residents looking for permanent positions.

We are hurtling towards uncertainty, but for people of color the future has always been uncertain. I think back again to Phillips' words: "We almost never think about how gender, race, income shift the means of access to the future." A warning, perhaps, or an indictment? I will nevertheless conclude with the hope that institutions can be creative in continuing to support their residents, past, current, and future, and in supporting people of color.

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