

Diversity, Intellectual Freedom, Access, and The Public Good are but a few of the Core Values of Librarianship that guide the profession as it continuously pursues the initiative to uphold the democratic notion that everyone has the fundamental right to read. The Freedom to Read Statement clearly indicates that access to information is critical to a society that is free-- a statement adopted by the American Library Association Council a full year before the ground-breaking decision of *Brown vs. The Board of Education*. As libraries begin or continue initiatives to make sure equal access is truly equal and inclusive to diverse communities regardless of color or socioeconomic background, the idea of libraries as neutral spaces in the midst of political turmoil and social issues often makes its way into the discussion of core values. Neutrality is not mentioned explicitly as a core value of librarianship, but it is a term often reflected upon in terms of library space, service, and intent. This essay seeks to understand how neutrality is used in the rhetoric of the practice of librarianship and attempts to answer the question of whether or not libraries should market themselves as inherently neutral.

The history of education has been centric to European American ideas and culture, which we know from the first attempts of Europeans to educate Indigenous Americans in their language. Kuelzer and Houser (2019) track how education was first used as a tool of assimilation for Europeans and Indigenous children in the 1600s, which set the racist standard of deeming whole cultures' way of life inferior or uncivilized. While English colonists attempted to control the thought and way of life of first peoples through educating them how they wanted people to be educated, slave owners were determined to control the lives of their slaves through anti-literacy laws in the 1830s. The idea remains the same: white education is thought to better the status of any individual-- education gives someone the opportunity to prosper. Anti-literacy laws were rife through the southern states in times leading up to the Civil War as Southern slave

owners used anti-literacy to make sure slaves attempting to escape to freedom did not have the capacity of knowledge to communicate with each other (Tolley, 2016, pp.13). No matter the context, education has historically been a tool of control and oppression. A common fear amongst the oppressors was the fear of knowing horrific and anti humanitarian injustices were being committed against whole groups of people and the consequences of those actions could potentially be violent uprisings. If people can read and write, they can talk to each other, they can share ideas, they can vote, and they can inform future legislation. Interwoven into history has also been this idea that such oppression was just because white education and culture was specific to a civilized, Christian, “good,” way of life and advancement and only those deemed deserving could have access to the tools of education. Therefore, whole cultures and civilizations have been denied the right to exist through the oppressors’ need to wipe out any culture, religion, perspective inconvenient to the oppressors way of life. Kuelzer and Houser also discuss how even well into the 1950s, quality and funded educational facilities were hard to come by for many African American families (2019). While the Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964, racist attitudes towards minority groups would continue through the whitewashing of textbooks and emphasis on Western perspectives throughout history (Aronson, Meyers, & Winn, 2020).

If a core value of librarianship is Education and Lifelong Learning through working with community authorities and academic administration to provide quality access to information, then the mission of library stewardship directly defies the history of American education. Wiegand’s article discusses the precarious history of library officials’ conflict with the subject of segregation and social justice (2017). One specific instance Wiegand points out is how in the 1920’s the Carnegie Corporation had wanted their funds to be used predominantly to serve white communities (pp. 2). So when the American Library Association adopted the “Library Bill of

Rights,” which included a notation about library spaces being non-discriminatory, it was contradictory for the ALA to stay quiet as protests continued to take place on the steps of all-white libraries that denied entrance to people based on color (pp. 3). An interesting theme in Wiegand’s research on neutrality and the core values of librarianship is how librarians often deemed speaking out on the subject of desegregation and social justice would somehow involve them in a political discussion even though the crisis at hand was barriers to accessing information (2017, pp. 6). Here we see how neutrality and very basic civil rights become spun into a question of bipartisanship. While segregating schools was legal at the time, any library (white or black) that denied access to a patron was acting against the very mission of the library and to stay neutral on such a subject whether they were deemed political or not was an action against what libraries stand for. Wiegand concludes their work by suggesting that libraries should recognize the contradiction of the Library Bill of Rights in the history of librarianship and move towards holding public conversations about the courage of African American citizens’ fight for equal education (2017, pp. 18). The literature indicates that social justice and inclusion has sides-- that the system of education and information is imbalanced.

If whole groups of people and cultures have been marginalized and kept from having basic civil liberties, then neutrality chooses a side without intending to. Wenzler (2019) says it best: “neutrality encourages moral cowardliness... by allowing librarians to hide behind false claims of evenhandedness as they capitulate to an unjust status quo” (pp. 56). With the history outlined above-- with literacy held as a weapon against marginalized groups-- would a library professional with all of their core values ever be able to claim neutrality? But then, if library staff are not neutral, do they point users to the direction of information they know does not accurately represent the true nature of a subject? Wenzler uses the scenario of a parent looking for resources

on preventing their child from being homosexual, which could lead the patron to reading and spreading false information regarding homosexuality (pp. 61). Does the librarian, knowing they are guiding the patron to the direction of misleading information on a topic that could be harmful, find a way to preface this? It would not be common library practice for the librarian or library staff member to offer commentary on the information a patron seeks-- privacy protects that patron from scrutiny. The core value of Social Responsibility tells the library professional that part of their responsibility in helping the community lies in providing people with all viewpoints and facts on a particular topic so the best solution can be made. The topic is extraordinarily nuanced. Saunders and Scott research the same issue and finally come to the conclusion that the issue is the word neutrality has too many different meanings throughout the literature (2020, pp. 13). This begs the question of whether or not neutrality even belongs in the rhetoric we use to inform library space and services.

The easy answer is to say systemic racism is a thing of the past and libraries can now be satisfied with supplying information in an equal manner to those who need it. If institutions are no longer segregated, then why even worry about removing barriers to information? Brooke, Ellenwood, and Lazzaro (2015) point out that institutions of higher education are often architecturally designed in European ways that reflect power and prominence rather than a reflection of a diverse student body. This means that now, today, students of all cultures and backgrounds walk through academic buildings every day with portraits of mostly white male former college presidents and founders staring back at them as a constant reminder of whiteness in education. Ellenwood, et al. also provide many solutions to add to library services, such as providing training to library staff so they can “learn about, consider, and act upon the historical context and power dynamics that shape racialized communication and racialized lives,” (pp.

276). How can a student expect to excel academically when they are constantly reminded of how groups were marginalized to the point that they were not allowed to be educated. That constant reminder is not a safe space for library patrons-- it is an unfortunate reflection of racist attitudes.

The same students and patrons that walk through the halls of libraries are still on the streets protesting racial injustice today. Pagowsky and Wallace (2015) of the University of Arizona document the creation of a guide designed to disseminate information to support the diverse college community in response to multiple recent instances of police brutality and the resulting #BlackLivesMatter movement. Pagowsky and Wallace address the protests against police brutality as a crisis facing the community (pp. 197). Because of this recent crisis, the librarians saw their role as information literacy instructors to support student learning by acknowledging institutional racism. Furthermore, Pagowsky and Wallace would encourage institutions of higher education to ask themselves “how our collections, organizational schemes, interfaces, instructional practices, and learning objects impact our communities” (pp. 200) when it comes to institutional racism in education and the world. If injustices of all types are a crisis of the community, then the library can address that crisis by shedding light on cultural bias and advocating for social justice. It is important to note that there are no sides to equality. The right or wrong of protesting inequality comes up in the language of the media and through government officials as if social justice is up for debate when there is no capacity for neutrality in the fight for civil rights and if the American Library Association can state that “the pervasive racism present in our nation denies its residents equal rights and equal access and as such is a barrier to the goals of this association” (The ALA Executive Board, 2020), then it is possible that those in the library profession can omit the word neutrality from their discussions. Neutrality implies that the events taking place in a society are equal, yet the very diversity and inclusion initiatives

taking place in communities across the nation prove that these conversations are still very relevant. If libraries are to be informative, then they can offer workshops, lectures, and literacy skills on the topics of racism and inclusion. Advocating for #BlackLivesMatter is not omitting other groups of people, but can be an attempt at balancing the scale of equality.