Librarians as Chief Diversity Officers in American Universities: A Clinical Librarian's Experience

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Abstract

This article concerns a clinical librarian's work as a chief diversity officer to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in healthcare and medical education at an American university. The need for healthcare professionals to have access to resources that can assist them with providing equitable care to all patients grows in tandem with the increasing significance of DEI in healthcare. These resources can only be provided by medical librarians. Medical librarians are uniquely positioned to provide these resources. From a unique perspective, a librarian serving as chief diversity officer for a multi-campus medical school in the United States can help ensure that these resources are culturally responsive and appropriate for diverse patient populations. This article discusses the benefits of appointing a clinical librarian as a chief diversity officer (CDO), promoting and increasing awareness of DEI issues through library resources, and the potential for creating more inclusive healthcare information.

Introduction

T he role of a librarian has traditionally been that of a guardian of knowledge and sharer of information. The librarian's role has evolved from supportive to collaborative (McAdoo, 2022); however, there has been a growing recognition of the librarian as a key figure in promoting diversity and inclusion in libraries and universities in recent years. Some libraries and universities have even appointed librarians as chief diversity officers (CDOs) to lead efforts in this area. As medical education and healthcare organizations prioritize diversity and inclusion initiatives, appointing a clinical librarian as CDO can offer a uniquely valuable perspective.

Promoting Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)

According to Tullis and Kowalske (2021), students from underrepresented groups frequently experience marginalization and exclusion at predominantly white college campuses, which negatively impacts their mental health and academic performance. To resolve this issue, schools and colleges should establish a climate where all feel esteemed and included. Institutions can offer training and support to faculty and staff on becoming influential allies and create safe spaces for students from underrepresented groups. Developing a diversity plan can be the first step in achieving diversity leadership across multiple campuses. The plan should include specific goals and strategies for recruiting and retaining a diverse staff and student body, and it should also include measures for assessing and evaluating the effectiveness of diversity initiatives. The

plan should also identify potential barriers to diversity and include strategies for overcoming these barriers.

Depending on institution size, there are generally three kinds of diversity officers: CDOs who report directly to the president or dean, senior diversity officers who report to everyone above the dean, and diversity officers who report to all senior-level administrators (Banerji, 2005). Diversity training and recruitment ensure that all members of the medical school community have the tools needed to promote diversity and inclusion. Diversity training for faculty, staff, and students across all campuses covers implicit bias, microaggression, and cultural competency. Providing staff and students with diversity training is essential for achieving meaningful and effective diversity leadership across the university. This training can create a more inclusive campus environment and improve the overall climate across disciplines, schools, and campuses, extending to the workforce as students graduate. Lack of diversity in the physician workforce contributes to health disparities; thus, diversity training and recruiting diverse students is critical (Aibana et al., 2019).

Implementing effective communication strategies is crucial for achieving diverse leadership across a university. Various communication strategies, including newsletters, social media, and email updates, keep staff and students informed about diversity initiatives and opportunities for engagement. Regularly scheduled meetings and conferences that bring together staff and students from all campuses can promote multi-campus communication and collaboration.

Medical Librarians

Medical librarians are crucial in supporting clinical research by providing expertise in information management, database searching, and research methodology. In addition, they support and train patients through education. Medical librarians can access health information that is trustworthy and simple to understand. Medical librarians also develop patient education materials and programs tailored to specific patients and health conditions. Librarians promote health literacy by helping patients navigate the complex American healthcare system and access reliable health information. Medical librarians also provide training and support to healthcare professionals in communicating effectively with patients of all ethnicities to improve health outcomes.

Several examples of successful integration of libraries, librarians, and those with library experience appointed as CDOs. For example, Michigan State University's library appointed an associate dean of diversity in 2021. The librarian was charged with strengthening the university library's commitment by promoting equal access to information and spaces for all (Morgan, 2021). Similarly, Western Illinois University named a music librarian the founding diversity officer in January 2023 (University Communications, 2023). Princeton University Library also appointed an inaugural librarian for DEI (The Trustees of Princeton University, 2022). This individual is working to evolve the library into a digitally and physically welcoming place that represents diversity (Office of Library Communications, 2022).

Several global library associations and institutions prioritize diversity and inclusion in their work. The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) promotes diversity and inclusion in libraries worldwide (IFLA, n.d.). The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) supports inclusive library services across Australia (ALIA, 2018). The Canadian Federation of Library Associations (CFLA) commits to promoting social justice and diversity and

provides resources to achieve goals related to equity (Morin, 2023). South Africa promotes a welcoming environment for people of all backgrounds (Kosciejew, 2020).

Library systems in the United States have incorporated cultural competence and diversity into policy; this emergence raises the possibility of international relevance (Blackburn, 2015). The population in Australia is diverse, and there is a need for the library staff to understand the needs and norms of a diverse population. Australian libraries are undertaking provisions for diverse populations, yet the workforce is homogenous (Blackburn, 2015). The Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL) is the national voice of Canada's university library system, and two federal institutions hired a visiting program officer (VPO) whose focus is on DEI. This inaugural position supports and plans initiatives to recruit and retain diverse library staff and create welcoming and inclusive services in research libraries (Morin, 2023).

A Medical Librarian's Experience

In my experience as a clinical librarian and CDO, I am working to promote diversity awareness in medical education. I started my library career as a library assistant in an academic library and continued working in several access services positions. After many years of working in access services, I attended library school part-time. As a staff member in a library with limited staffing, I taught bibliographic instruction classes to incoming first-year students and provided literature searches for faculty, staff, and students.

For many years at this university library, my role changed with the technological changes within our library system. The library joined an integrated library system (ILS) that propelled seasoned librarians into the 21st century. I was given additional roles as circulation systems manager, and I learned to set up semester-long calendars and due dates, as well as how to update student records. During staff shortages, I continuously worked in all library areas. Over the course of more than 20 years at this university library, my role advanced to access services manager. In this role, I oversaw electronic reserves, stacks, and interlibrary loan departments.

A few months after finishing library school, my role advanced to a professional position as a reference librarian. After only a few weeks in the position, I secured a medical librarian position at a medical school. As a clinical librarian, I continued to support research and manage staff, but instead of literature searches and bibliographic classes in an academic university atmosphere, I was now helping physicians, nurses, and medical students navigate complicated health information resources and evidence-based practice.

Diversity leadership at the medical school was a work in progress. Institutions prioritizing diversity in leadership are crucial to successful diversity initiatives (Stanford, 2020). In early 2019, the school's dean recommended restructuring the diversity office to add a dean of diversity. I applied for the position and was awarded an assistant dean of diversity position that would help with multi-campus diversity issues. During the COVID-19 pandemic, university leadership restructured several departments campus-wide. Campus libraries took a deep cut in staffing, with librarians taking on added responsibilities. After working for one year as an assistant dean, I was appointed to a new position as CDO and senior director of the underrepresented in medicine (URiM). The restructuring added URiM directors on all three campuses. The result would be a team supporting and implementing diversity initiatives, adding more members to the diversity committee, and representing diversity efforts on all three campuses.

One of the successes of restructuring to incorporate all three campuses is that everyone can simultaneously participate in diversity training and cultural education activities. Adding a diversity office on each campus with a URiM supports students within the Office of Student Affairs. These individuals engender trust. Each URiM director impacts the institutional environment with traits of change agents, such as trust and communication skills, and they are also future-focused (Parker & Trolian, 2020).

A review of the diversity action plan and climate survey addressed concerns of civility, belonging, and microaggressions. A plan to address these concerns through diversity programming on each campus ensued, including a diversity representative in all departmental committees, leadership meetings, curriculum decision-making, strategic planning, and admissions.

As a department, the Office of Diversity scheduled meet-and-greets on all three campuses. During the meet and greets, the university's CDO, the director of diversity initiatives, and the campus director of URiM met at lunch to discuss diversity initiatives with leadership, students, faculty, and staff. This meeting gave the diversity team visibility and an opportunity to discuss making the campus more welcoming, where students are respected and treated fairly.

During first-year medical student (MS1) orientation, the diversity office facilitates an anti-racism program. The program includes a presentation about the structure of the diversity office, a student-led discussion on the book *Fatal Invention: How Science, Politics, and Big Business Re-create Race in the Twenty-first Century* by Dorothy Roberts (2012), and an announcement of the diversity theme for the year. The diversity theme for 2022 was "Civility Matters." All MS1 and graduate program students received a civility matters t-shirt and lapel pin during the year.

Faculty, staff, and campus students also received "Civility Matters" pins. The theme highlighted ways to better interact with one another to prevent disrespectful behaviors in interactions with professors and leadership and in clinical settings. Civility is being constantly aware of others and respecting those different from us (Forni, 2002).

The theme for 2023 is "Inclusivity Matters." The diversity office also distributed t-shirts to all MS1 and graduate program students. The inclusivity theme highlights belonging, which is intentional inclusivity (Richardson-Melecio, 2022). Medical education is a transformative journey that shapes future health professionals. Exposure to diverse backgrounds enhances students' ability to understand and address different communities' unique healthcare challenges. Belonging and inclusion is feeling accepted, valued, and respected in a community. When students feel included and belong, it can lead to a positive learning experience (Richardson-Melecio, 2022).

Advocates question how effective CDOs will be in higher education (Gose, 2006). After restructuring the Office of Diversity, the primary challenges are shifting the mindset and climate of all three campuses, student loyalty to prior leadership, updating the diversity strategic plan to measurable outcomes and tangible actions, and gaining the trust of URiM and all students. Campus climate refers to the attitudes, beliefs, and practices of institutional members at colleges and universities (Parker & Trolian, 2020). Mindset shifts are most effective when they lead to tangible actions.

Shifting mindsets about diversity requires education and a commitment to change. A series of diversity town halls and educational presentations on microaggressions, implicit bias, inclusivity, civility, belonging, social determinants of health, and health equity engage conversations and

expand understanding of diversity on each campus. Educating the campus is a focal point and role of a CDO (Parker & Trolian, 2020).

Incorporating measurable outcomes and a tangible action approach to diversity strategic planning enhances accountability and transparency, and it also measures the overall effectiveness in an inclusive environment. Diversity officers guide higher educational institutions in examining how to understand diversity better and their commitment to creating spaces to engage strategic diversity goals (Magnus et al., 2023).

When institutions change diversity leadership, students loyal to prior diversity strategies may experience uncertainty and apprehension. Loyalty to previous leadership emerges from positive experiences, trust, and alignment with implemented initiatives. This loyalty is not harmful, and it represents a desire for stability. New diversity leadership may encounter resistance when students feel the strategies may be replaced and question the motives behind the change. Utilizing open and transparent communication through the yearly meet and greets on each campus to clearly articulate the reasons for the changes resolved uncertainty. Involving students in shaping the direction of diversity initiatives to address their concerns in monthly diversity committee meetings enhanced transparency with all students.

A key benefit of having a librarian serving as CDO is that they bring a unique perspective and skill set to the role. Librarians' training to be excellent researchers and curators of information is essential when it comes to identifying and addressing issues of diversity and inclusion. Librarians have experience working with a wide range of patrons, including those from diverse backgrounds, giving them a unique understanding of the challenges and opportunities in creating an inclusive library environment.

Serving as CDO has allowed me to use my librarian skill set to train others about diversity. Throughout the year, the diversity office serves in every aspect of the school with diverse representation on all committees, departmental meetings, leadership meetings, and admission interviews. Using the training I learned in library school ensures that all diversity presentations contain valid and relevant information. A librarian with a vast knowledge of resources and research expertise is vital to enhancing the skillset needed as a diversity officer. Librarian training helps identify a CDO's critical responsibilities and functions, develop cultural awareness competencies, research and recognize unconscious biases, and present findings to train others about cross-cultural understanding and sensitivity.

The position of CDO owes its lineage to its more controversial predecessors, including minority affairs officers, equal opportunity officers, and the once-legal affirmative action officer (Banerji, 2005). Organizations in today's rapidly evolving educational landscape often undergo significant transformations to adapt to change and accreditation demands. To enhance efficiency, organizational restructuring can lead to positive outcomes and unintended consequences, particularly related to DEI.

Library Resources

Medical libraries create welcoming spaces by providing resources that reflect patrons' cultural diversity. As society evolves, library resources will be essential in embracing and celebrating diversity. As chair of the diversity committee, I meet with faculty, staff, and students monthly to improve the school's climate and experiences. During one of our monthly meetings, a student

expressed concern and suggested including diverse images of skin rashes as a resource that will help in the classroom. Images in textbooks used in medical schools and conferences do not show patients of color in medical school educational materials (Nolen, 2020).

To resolve this issue, our medical library highlighted diversity resources on its homepage (Fuentes et al., 2020) by listing resources such as *Taylor and Kelly's Dermatology for Skin of Color* (Kelly et al., 2016)*, Transgender and Gender Diverse Health Care: The Fenway Guide* (Keuroghlian et al., 2022), *Medical Management of Vulnerable and Underserved Patients: Principles, Practice, and Populations* (King et al., 2016), and *Emotion in the Clinical Encounter* (Schwartz et al., 2021). Additionally, resources such as VisualDX+DermExpert Skin of Color Sort, a point-of-care tool containing an extensive medical image library reflecting disease on all skin types, help diagnose patients with darker skin types. Relying on libraries and librarians to identify, organize, and provide access to high-quality, understandable health information can make accessing medical resources more sustainable (Whitney et al., 2017).

Inclusive Healthcare Information

Diverse collection development requires continuous evaluation and improvement in assessing the resources' relevance, accuracy, and effectiveness. Incorporating culturally competent resources is essential and should represent various dimensions of race, ethnicity, gender, age, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic background. Medical librarians can establish partnerships with healthcare organizations, community health partners, and local clinics to gather input on resource development. Librarians' backgrounds in information literacy equips them to address misinformation, biases, and stereotypes that might hinder the progress toward inclusivity.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought to light the health disparities in American society, and libraries were crucial to addressing these issues (Louis-Jean et al., 2020). Librarians worked to make their services and resources available to everyone in the community, even to those who might not have had access to technology (Williment, 2019). Underserved communities can be supported through outreach and creating programs and services that foster a more diverse and inclusive environment, including removing access barriers.

Empowering individuals to make informed decisions about their healthcare is more critical after COVID-19 (Louis-Jean et al., 2020). By ensuring health information is inclusive of all demographics, we can bridge information gaps and address disparities. Inclusive health information helps everyone understand their condition and encourages patients to actively participate in their health journey.

Discussion

While specific attributes and types of expertise needed in CDOs will vary, the integration of clinical librarians as CDOs has several key competencies that enable them to collaborate and extend their influence across the institution (Pihakis et al., 2019). However, there are also opportunities for growth and development. By appointing a clinical librarian as CDO, healthcare organizations can demonstrate their commitment to diversity and inclusion and improve the quality of care provided to patients from diverse backgrounds. Information professionals are an asset to health literacy, which can lead to better health outcomes and health equity. Libraries and librarians are excellent resources for advancing practice and health literacy (Whitney et al., 2017).

Librarians, as information professionals and stewards of knowledge, are uniquely positioned to take on the responsibilities of CDOs within library settings and outside of the library setting. Integrating librarians into CDO roles marks a progressive step towards fostering diversity and inclusion within institutions. Their unique blend of skills, including resource curation, university engagement, and information literacy, positions librarians to effect transformative change. By embracing this trend, institutions benefit librarians and send a powerful message about the importance of diversity in shaping the future of education and organizational culture. Ultimately, this collaboration has the potential to create more open, equitable, and inclusive institutions that celebrate and value differences.

Conclusion

In conclusion, librarians have a unique role in promoting diversity and inclusion in their communities. Through their collections, programming, outreach efforts, and staffing practices, librarians can create welcoming spaces that reflect the diversity of their communities (Colibaba & Skinner, 2019). They can contribute to developing a society that is more just and equitable for all by doing so. Achieving diversity leadership across multiple campuses in different cities requires a comprehensive and intentional approach that prioritizes communication, technology, and training.

By developing a comprehensive diversity plan, implementing effective communication strategies, embracing technology, encouraging diversity in leadership, and providing diversity training, institutions can create a culture of inclusivity and equity that benefits staff and students across a multi-campus environment (Dawson & Cuevas, 2019). Achieving diversity leadership across multiple campuses in different cities can be challenging, but it is essential for creating a culture of inclusivity and equity within an organization.

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