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Figuring Out Where to Start, and How: One Library's DEI Strategies

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Diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) can fall into the category of big, deep thoughts. It can seem daunting to improve DEI at an institutional level. How do we go from abstract, and even overwhelming ideas, to tangible goals and objectives with timelines, budgets, and workflows? At Sherwood Public Library, nestled in the southern end of Portland Metro and Washington County, we implemented specific DEI objectives in our strategic plan and in the Edge Assessment. With a staff of 23 people (11 full-time equivalent employees) serving a community of 22,000 people, we found ways to make the right-sized goals that would stretch our collective and individual comfort zones and still fit within our capacity for staff time and funds.



Sherwood's demographics and diversity are changing, but not as fast as the rest of our region. In a city where 9 out of every 10 people are white and nearly everyone speaks English, it would be easy—perhaps even statistically justifiable—to leave the difficult and often uncomfortable work of diversity, equity, and inclusion to those large libraries situated within urban cores. However, to do so would be antithetical to the shared mission of public libraries and who we need to be in this incredible moment of opportunity where addressing the obstacles to diversity, equity, and inclusion has become a top priority nationwide. At Sherwood Public Library, staff and board members wanted to incorporate DEI objectives into our work as a way to open windows into other backgrounds, cultures, and perspectives—just as much as we wanted to provide mirrors for the diverse members of our own community. What follows is a summary of nearly four years of work on our path towards a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive public library.

Strategic Planning

In the Fall of 2016, Sherwood Public Library staff and Library Advisory Board members began the work of our first strategic plan (<https://www.sherwoodoregon.gov/library/strategic-plan>). We followed the Public Library Association's *Planning for Results* book as our guide and held two community forum sessions to gather public input iteratively. DEI was part of the conversation at the first session, but not the biggest focus. What we didn't expect was in the time between our first and second community forum sessions, the national dialogue drastically changed after the presidential election. Our community and board members came back to the table with conviction toward including DEI priorities in every part of our strategic plan. That conversation led to a new set of value statements embedded with DEI principles and created with staff, board, and community input (<https://www.sherwoodoregon.gov/library/page/library-values>). Three goals with a total of ten objectives are identified in the final plan—with five¹ of the objectives directly relating to DEI work.

Prioritizing DEI in our strategic plan galvanized our work. We now had permission to reallocate dollars and staff time toward goals and objectives related to diversifying the collection, providing staff training, increasing access to the collection and to technology through better signage and equipment, making our library more welcoming to new members of the community, and offering collections and programming in multiple languages. Our annual operating budget of \$1.3 million had no significant increases to take on the work of the strategic plan, and our staffing is lean for the amount of public-facing services and programs we already offered.

The ripple effects since launching our strategic plan have been exciting and invaluable. Our board members have become more engaged in library activities and monitoring our progress in the plan, and they have become stronger advocates for the library's role in the community as leaders in equity work. We have also seen stronger applicant pools for both

¹ Those are: 1c, Diversify the library collection to reflect and engage our growing community. 2b, Library staff will raise awareness of the library's services for everyone, including newcomers, ESL, and non-English speaking patrons. 2d, The library's online presence will be welcoming and inclusive. 3a, The library will be a leader in the community for providing free and equitable access to quality information and learning for all ages. 3b, The library will teach how to seek, evaluate, and use information in a variety of modalities for the spectrum of learning styles and abilities.



board member and staff position recruitments, with applicants often mentioning their interest in the work we are doing as a result of the strategic plan.

Staff Engagement and Recruitment

One of the first steps we took to shift towards applying a DEI lens to our work was to invite Ann Su of the Oregon Humanities Conversation Project to present “What’s in a Label? Thinking about Diversity and Racial Categories” to library staff. The Conversation Project is a long-running series of community conversations hosted by a trained facilitator about a timely and important issue within the facilitator’s area of expertise. Costs are on a sliding scale and a small or medium-sized library could expect to pay \$50–\$375.

The thought of participating in an open discussion about race with your co-workers might make many people cringe, and understandably so. That said, when beginning the work of shifting organizational culture to peer through a DEI lens, race may be the most honest place to start. Race, and subsequently racism, is a social construct that created the oppressive systems and inequitable society that we live and work within today. The *What’s in a Label?* conversation allowed staff the opportunity to identify, reflect on, and openly discuss the effects of implicit bias in a neutral space removed of blame and guilt, setting the stage for future conversations and trainings. Additional programs/trainings staff have attended are included in the sidebar.

We have also applied a DEI lens to our job recruitments. Open job descriptions have been updated to include fluency in a language other than English as a desirable skill and to reduce barriers to applying by modifying the required experience. Our interview questions have always included DEI topics, but now we are looking for DEI skills and awareness to be incorporated into more of the answer—and we score accordingly. It’s not all about library experience anymore.

Collection Development

The scope of the collection at Sherwood Public Library is primarily popular materials. As with many smaller libraries, we depended heavily on standing order lists for years. While these lists remain an efficient tool, the resulting collection demonstrated gaps in Own Voices titles—that is, titles authored by those who share a diverse, minority, or marginalized trait with their protagonist. In its interpretation of Article I of the *Library Bill of Rights* (2006), ALA states that library workers are obligated to “select, maintain, and support access to content on subjects by diverse authors and creators ... this means acquiring materials to address popular demand and direct community input, as well as addressing collection gaps and unexpressed information needs. Library workers have a professional and ethical responsibility to be proactively inclusive in collection development.” Not only that, but our new strategic plan specifically called out the objective to diversify the collection.

The first step we took to ensure Own Voices authors were included within the collection was to reallocate funds for a dedicated budget to diversify our adult fiction. We started as a pilot project with \$1,000. Now, we dedicate over \$3,000 a year to DEI collection development and have broadened the categories to include emerging authors. The fund represents about 20 percent of our total adult fiction budget. Creating a separate fund allowed us to prioritize authors who are marginalized within the publishing industry. Some favorite resources for selecting diverse adult fiction titles include *Books & Boba* (<https://booksandboba.com/>),



Latinx in Publishing (<https://latinxinpublishing.com/>), *World Literature Today* (<https://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/book-review>), and *Foreword Reviews* (<https://www.forewordreviews.com/>).

In 2018, we received a Diversifying Youth Collections Grant through the State Library of Oregon for \$3,000. The grant guidelines stipulated selecting from curated lists. We analyzed each potential addition to our collection for its inclusion of a broad range of voices, perspectives, and authors representing ethnic diversity, all genders and sexualities, and all abilities. We created printed and online reading lists to promote the collection, thanks to the work of a dedicated MLIS intern.

Applying an equity lens to collection development sometimes means taking big leaps for small collections. In 2017, with funding from our Friends of the Library and American Library Association, we decided to take a big leap—to the Guadalajara International Book Fair (Feria Internacional del Libro de Guadalajara, or, FIL). FIL is the largest and most important Spanish language book fair in the world, held annually in Guadalajara, Mexico. Original Spanish language materials that are culturally appropriate are notoriously difficult to acquire in the United States, and attending FIL provides access to over 2,280 publishing houses from 47 countries. With a budget of \$2,200 we acquired 130 titles—and, for a relatively small Spanish language collection, 130 titles significantly revitalized the collection and increased usage.

In 2018, we embarked on a pilot project to develop a new World Languages collection to expand beyond our English and Spanish collections. With data from our school district, we identified the top languages other than English spoken at students' homes. We started small, adding only board books, and in only two additional languages—French and Japanese. These languages were chosen because they are relatively easy to obtain and catalog for English-language speaking and reading staff through vendors,² and French is a common second language. This year we are continuing to expand our World Language collection, adding titles in Simplified Chinese and also adding picture books in the respective languages. Additionally, we are beginning to blend collections, purchasing duplicate copies of bilingual titles for both the World Languages and the English Language collections, exposing patrons to additional languages.

In addition to adding more diverse titles, we've also adjusted our deselection criteria. These items have niche audiences, will not circulate as often, and need more time for patrons to discover them. Many aspects of collection development depend heavily on statistics, and rightly so. However, the work of creating diverse, inclusive collections by applying an equity lens requires a more nuanced approach.

Programming and Events

In smaller, slowly diversifying communities, cultural programming creates a pathway to bring new voices into the community and challenge hegemonic thinking. Beyond promoting literacy, library programs offer face-to-face opportunities for individuals to engage with each other and promote cultural and racial literacy. Library staff sees this already in the



²Tsai Fong Books and Multicultural Books & Videos can provide bibliographic records for titles ordered through them.

multicultural music and dance events we already host. Here's how we expanded our DEI programming efforts:

- Annually since 2016, we present Bilingual Storytime in the Park as a 6-week series in the summer in English and Spanish. We did not have bilingual youth services staff and partnered with bilingual LDS missionary volunteers during our first two years. The events drew both native Spanish and English speaking families. By summer 2019, we were able to contract with an early learning specialist fluent in Spanish and English.
- We provided a fully immersive Spanish-language storytime for 10 weeks starting in April 2019. This was provided by Washington County Cooperative Library Services (WCCLS) and presented by a native Spanish-speaking early literacy specialist.

Additional DEI Trainings

- *Cultural Competence for Library Leaders*, presented by [De Etta Jones](#) at the Public Library Association pre-conference in 2016. We later shared an exercise Jones developed called “Mattering and Marginalization” with our staff at a staff meeting.
- *Cross-Cultural Tours*, organized by [Multi-Cultural Ministries](#) and held throughout the U.S. and Canada. A Portland tour is generally offered about once a year and includes guided tours of a Muslim Mosque, Hindu Temple, Sikh Temple and a Buddhist Temple.
- *Diversity and Cultural Competency Training: Collections & Readers Advisory*, a webinar through *Library Journal* that our library cooperative, Washington County Cooperative Library Services (WCCLS) sponsored.
- *Homeless Training Institute*, presented by Ryan Dowd, author of *The Librarian's Guide to Homelessness*. This training was sponsored by WCCLS. The Oregon State Library has since made the online version of this training available for free to all Oregon libraries[3].
- *Leading with Race* conversations have been held throughout Washington County as part of the presenting the *Leading with Race: Research Justice in Washington County* report and research from the Coalition of Communities of Color.
- *Otherring in the Library*, presented by Sonja Ervin, Equity and Inclusion Manager for Multnomah County Libraries.
- *Operationalizing Equity*, presented by Thomas Bruner of Bruner Strategies, and sponsored by Tualatin Valley Creates (TVC), a regional non-profit supporting the arts in Washington County. TVC frequently has trainings that can be relevant for libraries and priced affordably.
- *Trauma-Informed Care*, presented by Bryce Kozla of WCCLS.
- *Welcoming Diverse Audiences*, presented by Sharifa Johka, Director of Equity at Oregon Shakespeare Festival, sponsored by TVC.



- We added Family Inclusive Storytime in 2018, designed for all ages and abilities. A Youth Services Librarian provides a quieter storytime experience and methods to accommodate special needs.
- Coming Fall 2019, we will be offering our One-on-One Tech Help program in Spanish.

These programs always draw more diverse audiences, bringing together those wanting to learn about cultures other than their own and those who are seeking an opportunity to celebrate their own culture.

Spaces and Pages

Improving the accessibility and welcoming atmosphere of the physical facility and our website to new members of the community are objectives in our current strategic plan. Many of these solutions have been low-cost and low-effort. We are seeing statistical changes in library usage with an increased number of visits and library card registrations, higher circulation, and boosted computer usage. We are on this upswing of library activity, some due, we believe, to our DEI efforts, and some due to other efforts. Anecdotally, we have seen a more diverse audience visiting the library, engaging in the collection, and attending our events. In a library small enough that staff knows all the regulars, anecdotes carry a lot of weight.

- We have made priorities to make all displays diverse and inclusive. Our new checklist reminds us to incorporate formats besides regular books (audio, large print, movies, magazines, graphic novels, picture books, etc.), world languages from both adult and youth collections, representation from all genders—including non-binary, and a diversity of cultures, ethnicities, abilities, body types, generations and ages.
- Our interior wayfinding signage has been improved in phases. The Children’s area now uses signage with pictograms for both non-fiction and picture books arranged by topics to appeal to early readers and English language learners. Directional signs are in English and Spanish. Welcome signs are in multiple languages. We used a mix of professional signage (costing us \$9,000 to redo signage for our 14,000 square foot library) and signs we made ourselves for shelf-talkers and displays.
- We added a Spanish-language webpage portal and are now translating many public-facing print pieces, including policies, into Spanish. We are fortunate to have free translating services through our membership in WCCLS.
- The Edge Assessment helped us identify key ways to increase access to technology. One example is we changed an existing computer station to use adaptive technology, including a large-type keyboard, larger default screen resolution, and a trackball mouse to help accommodate poor vision and reduced fine motor skills. We also have these tools available for checkout through our Library of Things. The keyboard and mouse cost less than \$100 together.



- We are inviting an audit of our facility for ADA access later this year. Our insurer, Citycounty Insurance Services (CIS), offers this service at no additional cost to the employer.

Despite DEI work never being “done,” we’ve decided to put our recent DEI efforts and upcoming projects on our public website (<https://www.sherwoodoregon.gov/library/DEI>). We feel being honest about where we are in the process is part of being welcoming, transparent, and also brave. The more steps we take to increase our DEI efforts, the braver we get to have important conversations, to invite dialogue, and to evaluate our next steps.

Conclusion

To be at the starting line of DEI work is heartening and humbling. The work calls on us to embrace ambiguity and commit to the unending labor of pushing against the inequity in libraries that has resulted from generations of systemic oppression. Still, we are energized by the opportunity to create a space that allows for transformational experiences for all of our patrons. This is simply too compelling a vision for us not to begin. 🌱

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Resources

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<https://www.deettajones.com/>

<https://www.forewordreviews.com/>

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<https://www.oregon.gov/Library/libraries/Pages/Continuing-Education.aspx>

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