

Sue Erickson, Sophie Rondeau, and Maggie Sweeney

# “Drops of Diversity”

How a small academic library is working to increase cultural competence

Virginia Wesleyan University (VWU) is ranked 19th in ethnic diversity among national liberal arts colleges by *U.S. News & World Report*, a distinction held high by the institution. Diversity is a prominent feature of VWU’s strategic plan, and the institution’s core values emphasize inclusion and social responsibility. Given the diverse constituents on campus, librarians at VWU’s Hofheimer Library saw an opportunity to develop library diversity initiatives in an intentional way. What’s more, diversity forms an important component of the library’s strategic plan, thus emphasizing a commitment inclusive of the community being served.

## Formation of diversity team

As part of a broader reorganization structure that focused on teams and staff empowerment, Hofheimer Library formed a Diversity Team in Fall 2017, and a team leader was selected. An expression of interest was sent by the team leader to all library staff for team members. Fortunately, the library had several staff members with a particular sensitivity toward and interest in diversity issues, so the formation of a team was fairly simple. A library student assistant also expressed interest in being on the team. Team members had specific ideas about what they wanted to implement, but also saw themselves as diversity advocates to other library teams, such as collection development, outreach, etc. The library director reinforced this by ensuring that certain teams had overlap in membership with the Diversity Team. For example,

the membership of the Collections Team, the Display Team, and the Outreach Team specify that at least one team member must also be on the Diversity Team. This ensures that staff who will advocate for diversity and inclusion are present where decisions are made about collections, displays, and outreach.

In its early meetings, the Diversity Team had many ideas, and it became apparent that a diversity statement and action plan were needed to define scope and priorities. Over the next several weeks, the team reviewed statements from other libraries, brainstormed and discussed their understanding of diversity, shared their vision for advancing diversity and inclusion in Hofheimer Library, and eventually drafted the statement and action plan. The statement and action plan articulated the team’s understanding of diversity and provided four focus areas with anywhere from three-to-six broad-level action items. This document is currently under administrative review, with the eventual plan of making it public, as well as serving to guide the team’s work.

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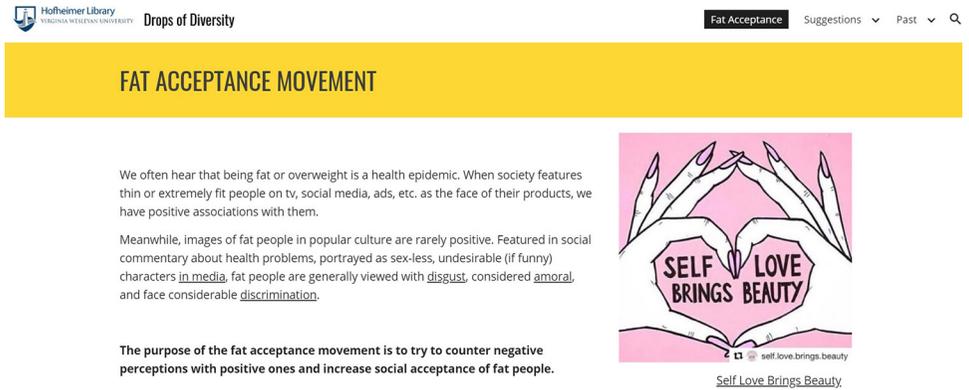
## Cultural competency focus

Since VWU did not have an office for diversity, it seemed especially important for the team to concentrate its efforts on Focus Area III of the plan—*Support and develop cultural competency for library staff*.

With limited resources, it would be difficult to draw on the expertise of outside facilitators to assist in developing cultural competency for library staff. However, the team did not want lack of funding sources to serve as a barrier to addressing this focus area. In response, members of the team decided to start a biweekly (later moved to monthly) newsletter. Written by team members, the newsletter would focus on a wide range of diversity-related topics.

archived in a different section on the site. The team chose Google Sites for its sleek and attractive interface, as well as the capability to store older articles easily. VWU is a Google institution, providing easy access to Google Sites, which makes sharing relatively seamless. What's more, Google Sites allows for audio and video embedding, so the team could include a variety of media formats on topics.

A screenshot is taken of the page on the day the new topic premieres and is sent out in an email newsletter. The older topics are archived as pages under a tab entitled "Past" and available for reference. The director has incorporated a discussion of the latest



## Screenshot of "Drops of Diversity" newsletter.

The newsletter was aptly named "Drops of Diversity" because the team acknowledged that the subject matter was complex and that the newsletter would only provide a brief summary of key issues. The topics presented would be shared with all library staff, including all 20 library student assistants. With the primary purpose of fostering ongoing cultivation of cultural intelligence in library staff, "Drops of Diversity" would be a starting place to stimulate discussions and to serve as a reference for future readers.

## Google Sites as platform

The team created a Google Site as a vehicle for publishing the newsletter. Each topic is featured on the homepage for a month, then

"Drops of Diversity" article in regular library staff meetings, and the library's student assistants are also emailed the newsletter and encouraged to read it on their work time. The Diversity Team leader set up Google Analytics to monitor site usage. The analytics data may provide some insight into how users are interacting with the site and inform the team if further marketing measures are required to increase usage and interaction.

## "Drops of Diversity" content

The team brainstormed various topics that they considered might be of interest and relevant to contemporary diversity discussions. Examples include nongendered pronouns, asexuality, PTSD, white privilege, Latinx,

etc. The content in these entries is generally short and meant as a brief introduction to the subject. They include brief definitions, visuals (charts, images, as well as fun cultural content like memes and cartoons), personal stories, links to websites, videos, and further readings.

A suggestion form for future topics is included in the site and in the email to library staff. The form asks if the sender is interested in authoring or coauthoring on the topic. After the first topic was sent, the Diversity Team received a suggestion from a library student assistant interested in asexuality. Not only was the student assistant keen to see the topic addressed, but willing to share her personal story on the subject. Sharing her personal story gave an authentic voice to the subject matter.

Additionally, another library student assistant requested an article be drafted on social anxiety. Although she did not wish to author the article, she shared her personal struggle with being frequently misunderstood as aloof or unfriendly and wanted others to better understand the challenges people with social anxiety encounter in their social lives. Although the Diversity Team members are assigned to specific topics, no bylines are used for articles, so all submissions are anonymized. The team hopes that this will encourage submissions.

In addition to using a variety of information resources to help inform our understanding of a topic, we also reach out to campus members and others within our network who have insight and/or expertise on a topic. For example, to address the topic of anxiety, a meeting with counselors from our counseling center was scheduled. On the topic of rape culture, the director of the Women's Resource Center was interviewed. These collaborations also serve to create awareness of where additional resources and support are available across the campus.

Writing "Drops of Diversity" has been a rewarding opportunity for Diversity Team members to delve more deeply into a wide range of topics. In some instances, team members come as outsiders to the topics and recognize that they may not fully understand the various

nuanced aspects. When the newsletter is distributed, it includes a disclaimer indicating the limits to the authors' knowledge and welcomes those with personal experiences to contribute to add greater authenticity to the topic.

Other constituents on campus have begun asking about "Drops of Diversity" and the library director hopes to expand use of "Drops of Diversity" to other campus departments. She has also begun inviting others on campus, such as faculty who have expertise on a particular topic, to contribute content.

## **Strategic planning and the development of core values**

Through a facilitated two-day staff retreat using SOAR analysis (Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, and Results), the library staff collaboratively developed a new vision and mission for Hofheimer Library. Core values emerged through this process and are embedded in the five strategic directions that evolved and specific priorities were identified under each strategic direction. Inclusiveness is a foundation throughout the plan. The strategic directions were refined after the retreat and strategic priorities were added under each direction.<sup>1</sup>

## **Events**

Under the strategic direction, "foster holistic personal and intellectual development and strengthen our sense of community in the service of humanity," a priority to "develop programs that cultivate self-knowledge and that encourage cultural sensitivity and inclusive action." With this in mind, the Diversity Team planned a panel with contacts through Equality Virginia, where individuals presented their own stories.<sup>2</sup> The team strategically invited a faculty member from Women's and Gender Studies to moderate, and she gave her students extra credit for attending the session. Other faculty from the department did the same, which resulted in an excellent turnout for the event.

Later that semester, the library's Marketing Team planned an event to tie into a larger  
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also begun referring faculty to use the EZ Video Studio in course development. Finally, they are reaching out more to instruction librarians as they work with faculty to design and develop online courses. In particular, they are now regularly consulting with librarians about locating and using high-quality OER and library-sourced content. One of CTL's high-priority projects, an adaptive learning program for general education math, has an OER dimension and the Engineering/STEM librarian has been a part of planning meetings for that program.

Anecdotally, the authors have observed that their team members are reaching out to each other in event planning and with general questions with more frequency than before the meetings. As this collaboration continues to develop, the instructional designers will elaborate on their process for online course design so that the librarians have a clearer understanding of their work. The partnership between the two groups will continue both formally and informally to meet the goals established at the onset of the project—networking, an understanding and appreciation

of each group's work, and opportunities for connection and collaboration. The fact that there are numerous methods for achieving these goals guarantees a long and lasting association.

## Notes

1. Joe Eshleman, Richard Moniz, Karen Mann, and Kristen Eshleman, "Comparisons and Collaborations between the Professions," in *Librarians and Instructional Designers: Collaboration and Innovation* (Chicago: ALA Editions, 2016).

2. Leslee Shell, Steven Crawford, and Patricia Harris, "Aided and Embedded: The Team Approach to Instructional Design," *Journal of Library & Information Services in Distance Learning* 7, no. 1-2 (2013): 143–155, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1533290X.2012.705627>.

3. Kimberly Mullins, "Good IDEA: Instructional Design Model for Integrating Information Literacy," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 40, no. 3-4 (May 2014): 339–349, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2014.04.012>. *zz*

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(*"Drops of Diversity," cont. from page 610*)

"Big Read" across the Hampton Roads region. The book selected by the NEA Big Read: Hampton Roads was *Citizen: An American Lyric* by Claudia Rankine, which focuses on issues around race.<sup>3</sup> Hofheimer Library seized this opportunity to partner with faculty again, and the library director moderated a panel of faculty from a variety of disciplines who reflected on the book. Thanks to panelists offering their students extra credit or incorporating the book into their course, this was another well-attended event. In addition, the library's Faculty-Staff Book Club also chose to read the book and attend the author event hosted by another university in the area.

## Future directions

Although the Hofheimer Library Diversity Team is currently only using the newsletter

internally, the director is considering the possibility of sharing the "Drops of Diversity" site more broadly. VWU's Center for the Study of Religious Freedom has expressed interest in having access to the site and possibly authoring content. What's more, the Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities (VCIC) has opened a location on the Virginia Wesleyan campus, and the library is interested in exploring how they may learn and partner with this organization. As part of the campus partnership, VCIC will provide training sessions for VWU each year. The library and the Center for the Study of Religious Freedom will partner this summer on engaging VCIC to offer training sessions for VWU faculty, staff, and students on topics that are of greatest

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